No Reasonable Prospect

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/56000416.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Hannibal Lecter & Original Child Character, Will Graham & Original Child Character
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Original Child Character(s), Abigail Hobbs, Margot Verger
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Different First Meeting, Kid Fic, Married Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Divorce, if there's any idea worse than marrying Hannibal Lecter it's divorcing Hannibal Lecter, and there's a child in the mix!, POV Alternating, Angst, Family Fluff, also murder horrible betrayal and manipulation, very questionable parenting, Minor Molly Foster/Will Graham, Angst with a Happy Ending
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2024-05-18 Completed: 2024-10-01 Words: 75,922 Chapters: 21/21

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by gzdacz

Summary

Will should have known from the moment he'd suggested they sign a prenup and Hannibal had said, *don't be perverse.*
There was that joke, wasn't there, that went something like, *marriage is a death sentence.* No—marriage is a *life* sentence. Just before signing his name on the marriage certificate, he had had a flash of panic—or a flash of sound fucking thinking for once—that told him very clearly, *don't.* He didn't listen, and here he was.

Notes

There are three key reasons why I've decided to write this. A, I need more stories about the two of them divorcing. B, I thought this would be loads of fun. C, Will gives me powerful weekend dad vibes.

If you're in the mood for a fluffy story about these two being model parents to an adorable little child, this probably isn't it. There will be fluff, sure, and you know, they are *trying,* but the child is not having a great time for the most part...

Final note: the fic does utilise some events from canon, but the chronology will be off. You can assume Hannibal and Will met something like six years before canon in this verse if you want a timeline, but it won't match up perfectly.

See the end of the work for more notes

The night of the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One.
The night of the Christmas Eve party.

The guests would all agree—privately, later, for it was impossible to imagine at the time saying anything that might offend their host—that the theme didn't really work for the occasion.

Those who had attended the Christmas previous reassured newcomers this was not the norm. The usual motifs of birth and baby would be too cliché for Doctor Lecter's table, but he had been throwing the party for nearly decade, and while he had avoided the boring, he had never struck a false note. There'd been gold and myrrh, there'd been stardust and comets, there'd been sacrificial lambs and the spilt blood of Betlehem's children. Doctor Lecter was known to be quirky.

Tonight did not feel quirky.

The wine came from the best winehouses, and the food made everyone feel sinful for merely eating it. A Christmas tree welcomed the newly arrived; its fresh scent permeated the dim spaces of the house. There were presents underneath, perhaps awaiting Christmas morning. Appropriately, it was snowing. A lack of Christmas spirit was not the problem.

This was the problem: there were hearts on the table, splayed open like chicken fillets. There were kidneys, ruptured, and livers swelled with poison. The braver guests soon discovered through poking that the organs were all sugar-work, and that the blood that seeped from them was candle-wax. The sabre that sat as centrepiece, bare and unadorned except for the candle blood, was real but dull. This did nothing to lessen the effect. If they had to agree on a word for it, they would say first that the table setting was brutal; second, that it was shocking; third, that it looked like a battleground of no survivors.

Doctor Lecter had said nothing of the arrangement. This, again, was not standard. Glances were thrown first at Alana Bloom, who had been a fixture at Doctor Lecter's for as long as any guest could recall and would know if things were veering off-course. Her expression was closed, her smile fixed, but there was a knot in her brow, and several observers noticed her throw glances at the phone she'd laid in her lap. Considering her usually impeccable manners, this was a greater cause for concern than the bloodied organs strewn over the table.

Then scrutiny turned to Margot Verger and her son, who, as those better acquainted with Doctor Lecter would know, were best qualified to gauge if there was anything the matter. The glamorous Margot Verger shone her jewels, spoke as little as usual except to those precious few she deemed worthy, and indicated nothing. At her side, young Thomas seemed fidgety, throwing increasingly dark looks at the head of the table. This was inconclusive: maybe he

knew something, or maybe he was a child bored with dinner and irritated at an order to sit still and behave.

There should have been two others, either of whom might have been looked to for aid. They were conspicuously absent. Not Doctor Lecter, not Alana Bloom or Margot Verger or anyone else at the table, seemed willing or able to address this.

If they hadn't verified the hearts to be sugar, some guests might have entertained the thought that it was in fact the absent that were laid out on the table before them, their blood netting like veins between the plates, turning capillary-like the closer to the edge they drew, staining the napkins like open wounds. It was a ridiculous thought, but the evening had the strange heaviness to it that invited the ridiculous. A few of the guests found themselves in need of reassurance, even if only in the privacy of their heads, of the facts as they knew them: this was only sugar and this was only wax—it must have taken hours to spill it just so—it was impressive, yes, and morbid perhaps, but only in a magical way. There had been no battle, no massacre; the edge of the blade was dull and the empty seats were the result of mismatched schedules or family disputes—of wounds dealt with words, maybe, but certainly not with war.

'I would like to thank you all for coming tonight.' Doctor Lecter's glass was in the air. They all scrambled to lift theirs. 'Traditions of winter solstices have evolved under each religion and with each culture that embraced them. If there is anything that remains today which we can all agree on, it is the communality of the occasion. I suppose that should be tonight's toast, then?'

He smiled, wide, gleaming, and the guests could not help but copy him despite the waxy blood, despite the tension in the room, despite the empty chair on his left, and, worse still, the empty chair on his right.

'To family,' Doctor Lecter said, wholly enjoying the irony.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

I will be posting the first three chapters this weekend and switching to a weekly posting schedule after. Chapter count might change - I'm more than halfway through writing this and all the way done with plotting, but who knows what ideas they might get.

In the meantime, come say hi on tumblr at gzdacz-writes-fic.

Three months before the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two.
Three months before the Christmas Eve party.

Amelie didn't use to like her brother very much.

Ever since they'd been very little, every time they'd play together someone would be crying by the end. This was because Amelie knew this simple fact: that Will was very kind to Tommy, that he spoke softly and patiently with him, and that he'd drive them to a store before each visit so Amelie could help pick out a present for him.

Amelie had never had any interest in picking presents for Tommy. Once, she saw a jigsaw at the store that she knew Tommy already had at home, and she insisted that nothing would make for a better gift until Will agreed with her. When Tommy saw the jigsaw, he said he already had one like it, and so it proved a double victory for Amelie: Tommy got told off for having bad manners, and Will was so embarrassed he hid in the kitchen for the rest of the afternoon.

Today, there would be no Will and no presents, which was good and right for once.

The Verger house was much bigger than Amelie's, with lands that stretched further than you could walk in a day. She preferred the lands to the house, especially now that they were reddening from autumn and full of squirrels. As soon as she was able, she extricated herself from the welcoming pleasantries, snagged some food off the table, stuffed it into her coat, and escaped to look for Tommy.

It was a game they played. Before she arrived, he would hide himself somewhere on the property and wait to be stalked down. Amelie had to be fast but quiet; she peered from behind walls and checked every door and window, muscles tensed in case she spotted movement and had to run.

It took her almost half an hour to find him. He rarely bothered to come so far out, and the low, sprawling building he had hidden in belonged to the butchery, secured with a code she hadn't thought he would know. The door stood just ajar, inviting. When she eased in, no alarm sounded. She scrunched her nose, overwhelmed by the smell: the pig enclosures were closed, hiding them from immediate view, but it did nothing to help diffuse the reek of ripening meat.

The lights were off, the windows shuttered. She moved in the dark, to the sound of the pigs shuffling and grunting.

A flash, there and gone. Amelie shot forward.

She tackled him to the ground. Tommy writhed under her, kicking and biting even as Amelie hit him, and at last she had to roll off to lock his neck in an arm vise until he could not breathe. Only then did he go slack and smack the ground in capitulation.

‘It’s so dirty here,’ she complained, sitting up. Her coat was brushed with grime. A few stalks of hay clung to it. ‘Look at the state of my coat.’

Tommy did not appear sympathetic. He massaged his throat once before speaking. ‘You took ages to find me.’

‘Because you’re not allowed here.’

‘So what?’

Amelie regarded him. She was a guest, which meant the rules did not apply to her, but she did think Tommy should have at least tried to follow them.

‘I might tell Margot,’ she mused aloud. ‘She needs to learn to control you better.’

Tommy kicked at her, which sent a further splatter of grime onto her coat.

‘Let’s find somewhere else to sit,’ she decided.

They settled finally in a large room overlooking several empty pig pits. You could sit on a sort of landing, with your feet hanging down into the pit, and rest your arms against the fencing. Amelie produced the food from her pockets: jellies, mostly, and some candied fruit.

‘Don’t you have anything else?’ Tommy asked from around the gelatinous body of a candy mouse. ‘I’m hungry.’

‘Tėtis and I made *charlotte russe*, but I’m not putting that in my coat.’

‘What is that?’

‘It’s a cake, you ignorant pig,’ sighed Amelie. ‘Give me the jellies if you don’t want them.’

‘Do you see this?’ asked Tommy, showing her a small cut on his palm. ‘I’m actually bleeding. You’re a psychopath. I should push you in and then let the pigs have you. That’s what my uncle used to do.’

‘He did?’

‘Yes. Right here. Until the pigs ate him. It was probably in this pit. Do you think there’d still be blood, if we went down there?’

Unfortunately, Amelie didn’t think so. ‘We can go check after,’ she said, leaned in, and bit the tail off his mouse.

Amelie liked her brother fine now. She was old enough to see it had been immature, how she’d acted then. Tėtis had tried to reason with her when she was younger, telling her how

Will did these nice things only because Tommy would never be Tėtis's son like Amelie was Tėtis's daughter, and that because of the way Will was made, he wanted to shoulder any guilt about that which Tėtis himself didn't feel—but Amelie had refused to understand. She'd only been little back then.

Once, when she was five or six years old, she remembered she'd asked Will and Tėtis why they'd chosen her and not her brother, back when they were born. She'd wondered if perhaps Tommy had been an ugly baby, and she had been the pretty one. Will had said they had both been beautiful babies, just as they were beautiful children now, and that they'd only chosen Amelie because when they saw her, they'd known right away she was theirs forever.

'But how did you know?' she'd insisted.

'I just felt it,' said Will. 'Sometimes, you look at someone, and you just know.'

She hadn't been satisfied with that answer. Tėtis had privately told her later that she had been a little more beautiful than Tommy, though he agreed with Will that this was not the primary reason for their choice. That had made her feel a little better.

She knew now the story was a lie.

Amelie and Tommy had discussed this several times since they'd learnt the truth, pieced together from online magazines and eavesdropped conversations among the estate staff. Still, they found themselves returning to the topic again and again. She didn't understand why: it upset them both to talk of it, yet there was a strange pleasure in drawing out the unpleasantness. Maybe it was the same thing you felt when someone had you pinned to the ground. It hurt, and you knew struggling would only make it last longer, only there was a part of you that wanted it to last.

'I should be able to come in here, anyway,' Tommy was saying now. 'This is all legally mine. If it's only Verger boys who can inherit, then my mother's the one who shouldn't be allowed in.'

'Right. You should tell Margot that.'

'Why are you calling Mom *Margot* all of a sudden?'

Amelie scuffed her shoes together. 'She's not my aunt,' she said. 'So why should I call her like she is?'

Tommy thought about it for a second, then nodded. 'Probably you shouldn't call her anything. She didn't even want you.'

Amelie kicked at his foot in censure, though without great feeling. She didn't really care if Margot had wanted her or not. In fact, she thought it was a rather charming idea to be an unwanted, accidental child, someone born to upset the best-laid plans.

'Do you ever think about it, that you weren't supposed to exist?' asked Tommy in a whisper. In the dim of the room, it sounded frightening. Amelie imagined pigs swarming the pit,

ravenous and blood-obsessed, and herself falling in among them. ‘It was just supposed to be me, the Verger heir. You were extra. You weren’t supposed to be here.’

Amelie tried to imagine what that would be like, not to exist. Maybe it was much like this, like sitting in the dark over an empty pit, in a place no one would ever think to look for her, only without the press of Tommy’s thigh against hers.

‘I would be a ghost then,’ she tried to reassure him, because she was older by several minutes and felt it was her duty not to seem afraid. ‘And I would come and scare you every night for revenge.’

They sat for a long time after, talking, then played in the pits. They did not remember to go back in to eat until they saw through the window the sweeping stream of a flashlight, scattered in the sheen of rain, and heard voices calling for them. They ran out through the back door, stalked around the building in the shadow of wall, and raced back to the house.

‘I can call off the search party, then,’ Margot said when she saw them. ‘Come have some cake. We looked for you, you know. Where were you?’

‘Just behind the house, in the trees,’ said Amelie. ‘I don’t know how you didn’t see us.’

‘Because of your camouflage, perhaps.’ Tėtis looked over Amelie’s coat with pronounced displeasure. ‘Was this necessary?’

‘Ask Tommy,’ Amelie said. ‘It was his fault.’

The sun had set by the time Amelie and Tėtis made it back home. It was September now, and dusk was beginning to come early. Soon, it would be dark long before anyone wanted to go to bed, evenings would stretch impossibly, and Amelie would get bored with them. She was looking forward to it: there was a pleasure in boredom, in wandering around the house that seemed more cavernous in the dark, in seeing vases and paintings changed by the fear that grew at night.

For half an hour, Amelie picked at her dinner. She felt just on the verge of sick from the jellies and cake and everything else. Looking at the meat made bile rise to her throat; the green beans *amandine* glistened unpleasantly in candle light; the *gratin* was dripping fat. She prised the lettuce from under the meat and chewed that pensively, playing for time.

‘I’m a sheep,’ she said when she felt Tėtis look at her.

‘Sheep eat about three percent their body weight in grass every day. You’re going to need a lot more than one leaf. Shall I bring out another head from the kitchen?’

Amelie sighed. She did not like lettuce. ‘No,’ she said miserably.

‘Then eat the meat, please.’

In the end, she managed four bites before resting her head flat on the table to stall the nausea, at which point Tėtis relented and let her go.

She went to the kitchen first for water. The steel surfaces gleamed clean and bare, save for the glass of red wine abandoned half-full. She stole a sip—red wine helped digestion—before setting it down in the sink.

The hallway loomed dark before her. The stairs disappeared into black. She held onto the banister as she climbed, feeling her way with a foot, the other hand tracing the wall, ready to feel the catch of the corner.

In her room, Amelie pried her hair loose from the braid. The street was dark and empty out the window, and it was still raining. When she shortened her gaze, she could see her own face looking back from the glass pane. In the reflection, you couldn't see that her skin had browned over the summer, or that her sandy hair had gone fairer in the sun, or even the colour of the dress she wore. You could only see the features of her face, growing more angular by the day, and the expression in her eyes that made her feel strange, alien, and more grown-up than before.

There was a knock on the door, which she'd left ajar. 'Amelie. Your father wants to speak with you.'

Amelie gave a sigh but took the phone from him. 'Hi,' she said.

'Hey,' said Will. 'How are you, sugar bug? How's school going? No: how was France?'

Amelie shrugged. 'It was fun.'

'Yeah? What did you like best?'

'I don't know. Everything.' Tėtis was still standing in the doorway, watching her as she talked. It unnerved her, so she turned her back on him. 'I can't talk very long. I'm tired.'

'Oh—sure. Of course. Listen—I know things are always busy the start of a school year, so I didn't want to—but maybe you'd want to come over next weekend? Give me the full vacation report?'

'I guess.'

'I got a new dog.'

That piqued her interest. 'A boy or a girl? How big?'

'You'll have to come next weekend and see for yourself.'

'I'll come Friday after school,' she decided. 'Tell Tėtis you'll pick me up.'

Before Will had had the chance to say goodbye, she handed the phone back to Tėtis and closed the door on him. Even through it, she could hear the murmur of Tėtis's voice, too flat and too clipped for comfort.

She lay on her bed and pressed a pillow against each ear, muffling the world.

She didn’t like hearing them talk to each other anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter three coming very soon. In it, we go back in time and find out how Hannibal and Will first met. It's time for Hannibal's POV!

Twelve years and three months before the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three.
Twelve years and three months before the Christmas Eve party.

‘Sometimes,’ Will had said once, ‘you look at someone, and you just know.’

When he’d first looked at him, Hannibal did not know. How could he?

When he’d first looked at him, Will had just walked unhappily into a Quantico lecture hall, gait rigid and glasses riding low on his nose. The glasses worked in tandem with the overgrown bangs to obscure his eyes entirely from view. As murmurs of perverse excitement rose among the psychiatrists gathered in the audience, Will embarked on an insightful yet remarkably hostile monologue. He never looked at them; they never stopped looking at him.

Hannibal had heard a little by then of Mr Graham, if only by virtue of the relentless gossip mill that was his profession. What he’d heard had not had a great effect on him: it seemed that Mr Graham, a recent transfer to Quantico, was a pet curiosity of many a psychiatrist already, and Hannibal preferred his pet curiosities previously unclaimed. Still, the lecture was engaging, the man’s cadence pleasant to the ear, and his hatred for the audience palpable. Hannibal wondered what Mr Graham would do if his dominion over the room were challenged.

He raised his hand.

‘Save the questions for the end.’

Hannibal obediently put his hand back in his lap. He listened attentively to the rest of the lecture and took note of any questions that came to his mind, hoping to chance upon one that would suit the task of shaking Mr Graham to the core. But the lecture ended, the projector blinked off, and the time for questions never came.

He went down the stairs with the crowd. He stopped by the desk in the centre of the room, where Mr Graham was gathering his things. He threw Hannibal a look—the blue of his eyes flashed from behind the curtain of hair—but failed to acknowledge him.

‘I am sorry there didn’t seem to be enough time for my question,’ Hannibal began. ‘I wonder if you’d be willing to answer it now.’

‘Yeah, I went over,’ said Mr Graham. ‘That was, uh, strategic. This isn’t a Q and A.’

‘No, but the seminar was advertised as a learning experience. I find I learn best if I have the opportunity to ask questions.’

‘Good for you. I need to go—another lecture. Excuse me.’

Hannibal nearly reached out to grab his arm and stop him forcefully, but he restrained himself. ‘Before you do go, can I trouble you for a card? Perhaps I could email you my questions instead.’

Mr Graham pulled a card from his pocket with such brutality, it was a wonder the lining of the jacket hadn’t torn. He was gentler when he extended it to Hannibal, like he was putting conscious effort into not hurting him by accident.

Then, he turned on his heel and disappeared into the thinning throng.

Hannibal had intended to place Mr Graham’s card along the others in his collection, for reference once their encounter had faded from the memory of witnesses. He found he was reluctant to part with it, though. The issue of Will Graham felt pressing, begging immediate attention, and the card remained on Hannibal’s person in the following week, carried in the pocket over his heart and occasionally taken out to be examined.

‘I met Will Graham,’ he mentioned to Alana on Saturday when she came over to celebrate her new contract.

There was tension in her immediately. ‘Oh. When did you meet Will?’

‘An open FBI seminar on criminal psychology. I was invited by a colleague. I admit I found Mr Graham’s lecture a highlight of the day.’

‘I didn’t know you were interested in criminal psychology, Hannibal,’ Alana teased. ‘I thought that was my schtick.’

‘And I wouldn’t dare try to steal your schtick. I may have been more curious about peeking behind the FBI’s curtain than in the teaching material itself. And you are avoiding the subject.’

‘The subject of Will Graham?’ She took a swig of her beer, then set it down on the end table. The sofa’s cushion sighed as it took on her weight. ‘There aren’t many psychiatrists in Washington who’d ever avoid the subject of Will Graham. I would like to think there’d be at least one exception—and I’ll be that exception if need be.’

‘Deciphering the code of Mr Graham’s psyche would sound interesting, I’m sure—if only I’d found him more personable.’

Alana laughed. ‘He’s not great at first impressions, is he?’

But this was not exactly true. The impression Mr Graham had made on Hannibal was hardly a good one, but it was certainly *powerful*—the card was still in his pocket, and he felt a phantom warmth from it that ensured he rarely forgot its presence.

Even more strangely, he found himself making excuses for Mr Graham’s rudeness. He was understandably oversensitive and distrustful of psychiatrists, so he had been keen on maintaining a safe distance. He had used his empathy to glimpse Hannibal’s intention of rattling him and employed the easiest tactic to scare him away. The simple design of his name

card suggested he was a man who preferred to cut to the chase; he had not meant to offend but could not help his own instincts.

Hannibal was not a man who put much stock in excuses. If one wanted to find justification for any instance of poor manners, one was guaranteed to find it, but no matter the cause, a bad day or poor socialisation in childhood, Hannibal expected that an adult human should be capable of rising above it. If they didn't, that was their own personal failing.

When he tried to apply the same reasoning to Mr Graham, all he accomplished was to spark an unhappy, petulant feeling in his chest. He could not condemn Mr Graham for his behaviour. He was not, as displeased as he was to admit it, above the curiosity that ran so rampant among his colleagues. He *was* curious. He wanted to know him.

On Tuesday afternoon, he picked up the phone. It had been six days since he'd first seen Will.

'Hello?'

'Mr Graham. This is Doctor Hannibal Lecter. We met last week at your lecture—I asked for your card.'

'Oh.' The line clicked as Mr Graham cleared his throat. 'Right. I remember.'

'I was wondering if you'd be willing to meet at any point to discuss a patient of mine,' Hannibal delivered his excuse. 'I admit I have little experience in treating patients with criminal tendencies, and I have some concerns about this patient that I would like to run by an expert.'

There was a sigh from Mr Graham. 'If you have reasonable ground to believe they might hurt someone, you have to report it.' Before Hannibal had had the time to blister, he added, 'But I guess you knew that. Alright. You can drop by my office tomorrow—I mean, if it's not too long a drive—'

Hannibal had not expected this to go quite so smoothly. He felt a little disappointed. 'I would appreciate it. One o'clock?'

At two minutes to one o'clock the next day, Hannibal was knocking on Mr Graham's office door for the very first time.

'Come in. Take a seat if—wait,' came the gruff instruction as Mr Graham attempted hastily to move the papers and mugs from the chair to the stacks awaiting on the desk. It made Hannibal think of a game of sticks. 'There. Sorry. They've only just moved me in here, and I haven't had the chance to—people don't really come in here, usually. You want coffee?'

Although he had not met Hannibal's eye since he had entered the room, Mr Graham's manner was significantly improved otherwise. Perhaps he did not see Hannibal as a threat now that it was just the two of them. It was not a pleasing thought.

'I have actually brought my own from home. Do you mind?'

‘Uh, no. Sure.’

Hannibal poured half of the coffee into the little cup the thermos came with, and half into the mug on the desk that looked fresh. If the presumption raised Mr Graham’s hackles, he did not show it.

‘I wanted to thank you for agreeing to meet me on such short notice,’ said Hannibal gracefully. ‘I appreciate the courtesy.’

‘Yeah, well. I may have felt a little bad about the seminar.’ Mr Graham rubbed at his neck, as though to budge the shame that sat there. ‘I didn’t want to do it and I took that out on you. Not my finest moment.’

To show his sincerity, or perhaps simply to check the effect his non-apology had achieved, he then met Hannibal’s eye at last, only briefly—and Hannibal decided immediately that he was forgiven.

‘It’s understandable you would be wary of a room full of psychiatrists. I’m afraid your reputation precedes you, Will. Doctor Bloom advised me not to take it personally.’

He had meant to keep his acquaintance with Alana to himself a little longer, but in the moment had wanted only to entreat himself to Will *now*. It worked a charm: Will’s shoulders relaxed by a fraction, and they spent a pleasant two minutes’ time chatting about Alana and how they each came to know her.

All too soon, it was back to business for Will. ‘Tell me about the patient, then.’

Hannibal was hardly going to tell the truth; Hannibal’s patients were his own patients, and he disliked the idea of sharing. Still, spooling a whole lie was a dangerous gambit considering Will’s reputed insight. He decided to use his recent acquisition, the young Margot Verger, as foundation for the lie.

‘I am mindful of doctor-patient confidentiality here, so I will be vague,’ he began. Will had leaned back in his chair to listen. ‘This patient came to me recently, and from early on, our conversations have revolved around violence. They have suffered considerable trauma in childhood, the specifics of which elude me even now—I suspect they do not recall them in any detail. I do know that whatever happened was brutal, and perhaps impossible for a child’s mind to contend with. Anger in the aftermath of such trauma would be natural, but the patient doesn’t seem angry.’

‘What do they seem?’

‘Unwilling to dwell.’

‘Unwilling or unable?’

‘Unwilling,’ Hannibal stressed. ‘Disinterested in sorting through the past and focused on the present. I would actually consider it a sign of a strong mind—if not for the fact that the patient clearly enjoys discussing the possibility of taking revenge on those they believe

responsible. Again, this would be standard, but the lack of anger worries me. The intent seems altogether clearer and more self-assured as a result.'

Will angled his head, as though trying to catch the melody of a faint tune drifting in from another room. 'Just because the anger doesn't show doesn't mean it's not there. It'll be repressed along with everything else.' He teeth flashed white, digging into the lower lip. 'Of course, repressed is usually bad news. But you want to know—no—you don't care if he takes revenge. So, what do you want to know? If the violence is doomed to spill? If he'll stop at mere revenge, or if he'll carry on?'

Hannibal swallowed. 'It would be helpful,' he lied.

'No, it wouldn't,' Will countered immediately. 'You can't actually tell these things. No one's doomed. Nothing's pre-written. Your patient will be better off if you focus on helping them with the rest of it. Help them get angry. Help them dwell. Help them live through it. I mean, you know—all the usual tricks. I won't tell you how to do your job.'

'And if it ends in blood, it ends in blood,' Hannibal said, a smile threatening to break free.

Will gave a sharp nod. 'If it ends in blood,' he echoed, 'let there be blood.'

Once, on a slow autumn morning when Amelie was five, she surprised Will by asking him to tell the story of how they'd met. Will had been caught off guard and stumbled for a while trying to find a way out, but faced with her persistence and the cooling *blynai* on her plate that would not get eaten otherwise, he surrendered himself to it.

Hannibal pretended to be busy with dishes and disinterested, although of course he wasn't. There were only two people in their lives at that moment who could reliably put Will on the back foot, and regrettably Hannibal had few opportunities to observe Will's interactions with Jack Crawford. Amelie was a fine substitute, though at five, her interrogation technique was understandably lacking.

'But why didn't you come,' she asked, 'if you were invited? If you're invited to a party, you have to come.'

A laugh from Will, short and uncomfortable. 'You know Daddy isn't exactly a fan of Tėtis's parties.'

When Hannibal glanced over his shoulder, he saw Amelie shake her head, annoyed with him. 'But you didn't come *three* times.'

'Is that right? I only remember the one party.'

'You don't even remember!' The final vowel rang out sharper than usual, and with her next utterance she switched into Lithuanian, 'Tėtis, he doesn't even remember!'

'Yes, I heard,' Hannibal said. 'It's interesting what the mind chooses to remember, and what to forget.'

‘Maybe Tėtis can stop making his little comments from over by the sink,’ Will remarked sourly, ‘and come get his daughter to eat.’

‘But you’re doing so well.’

Stories were usually Hannibal’s domain. Will preferred to work with texts written for him by others, more willing to place his trust in strangers than risk the wrong message. Sometimes, when he’d said too much, or said the wrong thing, he would retreat into silence for hours, avoiding their company and preferring to bury himself in his shame. Hannibal hoped it would not come to that today; they had plans for a country excursion in the afternoon.

‘Keep telling,’ Amelie demanded.

‘Then—I guess then we, uh—ran into each other.’ It was a good thing Amelie still struggled picking up on sarcasm, because Will’s voice was dripping with it. ‘At a bar one night. We had a nice time, and I promised to show up next time there was a dinner party. Open up.’

‘And then Auntie Margot was pregnant,’ Amelie reminded before opening her mouth. There was a moment of chewing, followed by a whine. ‘And then what? You have to keep telling me!’

‘Well, Auntie Margot’s family weren’t very happy with her. They didn’t want her to have you, and Tėtis was worried they’d bully her. So, he asked me to come, show them my FBI badge and scare them straight.’

‘I don’t recall asking,’ Hannibal corrected gently, knowing Amelie would pick up on the inconsistency.

‘Fine. He didn’t ask, I offered. Whatever.’

‘Not whatever,’ said Amelie. ‘You have to tell it right.’

‘I’m telling my version of the story. If you want Tėtis’s version, you have to ask Tėtis.’

‘No, I want Daddy’s version.’

‘Okay. Another bite. Because Margot was having twins, the pregnancy was tough on her. She had to spend some time at the hospital. Daddy and Tėtis were helping drive her and find her the right doctors, and we all became friends in that time.’ They had come up by now with a consistently child-friendly version of that first year of their acquaintance, and as Will stuck to it, he almost sounded as though he believed his own mistruths.

‘And when you were born,’ Will continued, ‘I remember—I remember when I got to the hospital, Tėtis was sitting in a chair, and he was holding this tiny bundle, barely bigger than his hand, and I thought, that can’t be you. You’re too tiny. It’s not possible—how could you possibly be alive, and so small?

‘I was a perfect weight,’ Amelie disagreed. ‘I got a ten on the Apapgar score.’

‘The Apgar score,’ Will laughed. ‘Yeah. This is starting to sound like Amelie’s version more than Daddy’s version.’

‘It’s not.’

‘Alright. And—and before I saw you, sugar bug, I wasn’t sure how all this was going to go. But after I saw you two, I couldn’t—I couldn’t imagine it going any other way.’

‘And then you got married.’

‘Well, a little after all that. But yeah.’

Satisfied, Amelie took another bite of her breakfast without needing to be told. Will had followed the template of Hannibal’s story, overheard in the telling, and the template had been designed to satisfy. Amelie wasn’t interested in the story of their romance; she wanted merely a confirmation that she sat at the centre of it, that she was the locus of their lives, that Will had become part of their family for her first and for Hannibal second. Hannibal knew his daughter. He knew just the right lie to tell.

The night Will had merely glazed over in the telling, the third time they met in person—it had been the lecture first, Will’s office second, and the bar third—Hannibal had decided within himself that direct action had to be taken. He had withstood the rejected invitations to dinner parties, he had bid his time, he had pursued other occupations, and yet he felt himself still in the same position he’d been in after he’d left Will’s office nearly four months prior. The situation was a strain on his time and his energy, and he did not appreciate Will’s staunch refusal to cooperate.

The bar he had followed Will into that night was dim, as all such establishments were, and nearly empty. Those desperate enough to seek the relief of alcohol on a Tuesday night had gone to worse places; those who had both the leisure time and the money for mid-week outings had gone to better ones. Will occupied the diner-style booth all on his own, nursing a scotch, a headache, and even as he sipped trying to take frantic notes on a scrap piece of paper. Hannibal observed him a moment, wondering what had inspired him so, before he moved in to playact a chance encounter.

Will’s pen wavered over paper when the new presence registered. His shoulders drew back, his brow tightened. His hackles were up, but then he forced himself merely to continue with his notes, and said without looking up, ‘This is approaching restraining order territory.’

Hannibal found the comment entirely offensive. He was under no obligation to disclose his own reasons for happening to frequent the same bar Will did; that Will should immediately presume himself to be the driving force behind this outing was a display of arrogance and forwardness that Hannibal did not appreciate.

‘I was merely going to say hello, Will, since we both happened to—’

‘Oh, don’t do that. Don’t lie. You’re not good at it, Doctor.’

Hannibal bristled. ‘If you don’t wish to see me, I will leave.’

Will dropped the pen. He ran a hand over his face, leaving behind pink lines. ‘No, it’s not—just sit down. Alright?’

Hannibal sat down across from him. He regarded Will and allowed Will to regard him back. He felt as though they were two parties involved in an important negotiation, assessing the other for weaknesses to be exploited. If this were a business negotiation, he thought, it would be about a take-over. If it were judicial, it would be about divorce.

‘I didn’t mean to put you in an awkward position, Will,’ he offered. ‘You were missed at my parties, but I didn’t take it personally. I understand you might have felt uneasy accepting when we hardly know each other.’

‘I was afraid you wanted to show me off,’ Will said. Hannibal realised he had misremembered the sound of his voice and misconstrued the way his mouth shaped around words. ‘That you wanted a curiosity, something for you and your friends to talk about over dinner. That—that that’s what this was.’

His sudden honesty was debilitating. Hannibal had spent a not insignificant amount of time strategizing before this encounter, but the reality of Will, after months of the faux, misremembered Will in his head, made all that time preparing seem a waste.

‘At least I don’t have to be afraid of that anymore,’ huffed Will. ‘Stalking’s a little overkill for securing evening entertainment, even for a man like you.’

‘What kind of man am I?’

‘Stubborn? Perseverant? Hell, I don’t know.’ Will took a generous swig of his scotch. Hannibal imagined it burning down his throat. Will swallowed, then said, ‘I wish it had been the other thing. This might be worse.’

Hannibal was not entirely sure what *this* was, but he resented the idea it might be in any way inferior to whatever Will had feared.

‘Why is this worse?’ he prodded.

‘Because this is a bad idea. Because you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.’

‘Neither do you,’ Hannibal pointed out, and was equally surprised and gratified when Will laughed. It made all his teeth show white and stark.

‘Oh,’ he said, running a hand over his mouth as though to rub the laugh off, ‘I think I have a pretty good idea.’

Hannibal wondered if he should clarify his intentions. It was obvious Will expected a romantic overture, and Hannibal remained unconvinced it was the thing to do. If he were to pursue Will, he might find his focus further strained, and his energies entirely exhausted on the chase. Will did not strike Hannibal as an easy catch, and there was a point at which curiosity alone was simply not worth the expense.

‘I only wish to socialise,’ he said eventually. ‘And to get to know you.’

Will’s hum was frustratingly sceptical. ‘Here’s the thing,’ he said. ‘This,’ he waved in the general direction of his own face, ‘sometimes tricks people. Socialising usually sets them straight. But I’ve already been my best unpleasant self, and you’re back for more. I’m worried you might drag it out past—past whatever natural end’s written into any of my attempts at relationships. Which I don’t really have in the first place.’

While still too presumptuous for Hannibal’s liking, the statement did spark a want in him. If there were any way to excuse the inexcusable waste that pursuing Will Graham would inevitably become, it would surely be that Hannibal could achieve what no one had achieved before: not merely to capture Will, but to hold him past the initial panic reaction.

And once Will had stopped throwing himself against the cage door, Hannibal could easily release him back into the wild if he so chose; and to observe whether he was the same man still as he’d been going in.

Hannibal smiled. ‘If anyone who shows an interest receives this very spiel, I’m not surprised relationships are difficult for you. You are very clearly a better teacher than you are a salesman, Will.’

Just as he’d hoped, this made Will’s teeth show again in a grin. ‘I’m not sure I am. It doesn’t look like I managed to teach you a single thing these past four months.’

That he would remember so precisely the time elapsed since they’d met first made Hannibal oddly uneasy. He decided to ignore the feeling and instead shot back, ‘If you agreed to put in more contact hours, perhaps that could be remedied.’

Will leaned back in his seat. His thumb caressed the brim of the glass as he regarded Hannibal; no repartee came, no further acknowledgement of the flirt, and yet it did not feel as though Hannibal could claim the final word. Will’s smile, closed-lipped now but softened by the late time and the scotch, had the final word. As Hannibal would soon come to realise, it always did.

Chapter End Notes

Next week, more on the early days of Hannibal and Will's relationship.

Eleven years and ten months before the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

‘How are you, Hannibal?’ she asked. It occurred to Hannibal he had not been asked the question in months, not in a tone that invited a true answer.

He thought about it.

‘I have been considering fatherhood,’ he said.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Four.
Eleven years and ten months before the Christmas Eve party.

Some might say there had been no Amelie before Hannibal gave her the name. Others would say Amelie began when she drew her first breath and screamed, others yet that she began on the Petri dish at the moment of conception. They would all be wrong.

Amelie began on a winter morning in Will’s damp second-story apartment.

Outside, the weather was still but sharp with cold. It snuck in through the poorly insulated windows and painted the panes frosty from the inside. Will was engaged in a stand-off with his landlord; the guerilla warfare had escalated, and now there was no power and no heat. Hannibal had arrived in the heavy-duty coat and scarf which had been specified in Will’s invitation, and he had bought spare batteries on his drive into Washington. He had offered to resolve the situation, of course, by simply paying the electricity bill himself—short of killing the landlord, which at this point was sure merely to complicate the issue, he saw no other practical choice—but Will would not hear of it.

‘I am not letting him win,’ he’d announced through chattering teeth. ‘No one is paying the bill. I mean it—you want to play the hero and pay it in secret, do it. I’m going to blow all the fuses, then call them and ask for the money back.’

Hannibal was only beginning to outline the shape of Will’s internal mechanisms, but if he had discovered anything within the month they had been seeing each other, it was that Will truly came to life when he’d dug his heels in.

The floor of the apartment was strewn with old newspapers and the flats of surplus cardboard boxes. The coffee table was occupied by a large plastic bag from which spilled Will’s summer duvet. Hannibal eyed it as he poured out the coffee—brought from home, of course,

on account of the stand-off—to make sure it would not get the idea to topple over and take the cups with it.

Will threw himself on the couch at Hannibal's side, disrupting the pool of liquid and shaking the table. Hannibal grabbed at the plastic bag just in case.

'I always forget what a pain this is,' Will said. 'I should get rid of half this stuff.'

'You don't have many things,' Hannibal pointed out. It had surprised him a little. He would have suspected Will to have the hoarder's temperament. 'I imagine the house will still look quite bare even after you've moved them in.'

'The previous owners left behind a bunch. There's a good bookcase, and a piano, even—did I show you the piano?'

'No.' Hannibal shook his head, feeling indulgent. 'Will you show me now?'

He would be seeing the piano that very afternoon with his own eyes, so looking through the poor-quality photographs on Will's phone served little purpose. He looked anyway. Will had drawn closer, his arm brushing against Hannibal's arm, his thigh aligned with Hannibal's thigh, the nylon of his jacket whispering when it caught on a seam in Hannibal's coat. Will took all this in stride, going so far as to lean into Hannibal, closer and warmer, acting as though this was a normal thing they did every day. It was all precisely why Hannibal did not enjoy visiting Will at his apartment, and why he was sure he would despise visiting him at his new house in Wolf Trap, too. Familiar places emboldened Will: they eased the lilting strain in his voice, they stopped him cringing his embarrassment, they encouraged him to assume control over the path their conversations took and over the moments their eyes met. Will as host was a different creature to Will as guest. On Hannibal's sofa, in Hannibal's home, Will would startle easily, would press himself into a corner, would look with halting unease at the ornaments on the walls and the cut of Hannibal's best suits.

Still, Hannibal had agreed to come today, and he knew he would agree eventually to drive to Wolf Trap to see him if Will so desired. Today, it had been the simple matter of the opportunity that packing afforded: to inspect from up close Will's things, to observe the way in which he folded his clothes, to gain access to the personal effects that would normally require subterfuge. Tomorrow, or the week after, or whenever next Will declined his invitation to come over or to go out, Hannibal would resign himself to being palmed at and irritated in Wolf Trap because otherwise he might not see Will at all, which was the only thing worse than seeing him.

'I might get a dog,' Will mused. The screen of the phone had blinked off, and he'd rested it against his thigh. His head, he'd rested against Hannibal's collarbone. It made it difficult to swallow. 'I used to foster back in New Orleans. Feels like ages ago.'

'I'm not surprised.' Hannibal said. He wasn't, not even at how fascinating this mundane piece of information struck him. He had learnt by now that this was a talent of Will's: something about his natural reserve, his paranoid privacy, or simply about the tone of his voice as he spoke, made every tidbit of personal information he divulged sound like gospel.

‘No?’

‘No. You are fast to emotion and chronically lonely. Dogs suit you.’

When Will laughed, through the press of him Hannibal felt the vibrations in his own chest. He forced in a breath to still them.

‘You’re also protective,’ Hannibal added, deciding he should be kinder. Though Will did not let it show, Hannibal imagined he expected courtship. ‘The champion of all goslings in Washington state.’

Will sighed. ‘I stopped *one* car to get *one* goose across the road. You’re too fixated on this.’

Hannibal agreed. At the time of the event, however, he had been there to see it with his own eyes. For a week, he had found it challenging to think of much else.

But something in Will’s sigh sparked a new interest in Hannibal. There was a hidden feeling there, a double meaning, an unexplored source of agitation. He shifted to the side in order to regard Will’s expression. It was closed, his eyes affixed to the floor. He seemed irritated that Hannibal would presume to look at him, and he tried to move off. Hannibal caught him by the arm and held tight.

‘Would you want children, Will?’ he asked.

Will huffed. ‘I know you’re not that type of doctor, but there’s a pretty big genetic gap there between a gosling and a human child.’

‘You would,’ Hannibal understood. ‘Why would you be ashamed of saying so?’

Will tore himself free. It took effort. Hannibal saw him massaging the spot on his arm where he had escaped Hannibal’s grip.

‘Let’s just go,’ he said. ‘We can finish the coffee when we get to Wolf Trap.’

‘You haven’t answered my question, Will.’

‘I’ve known you a month.’

‘Five months.’

‘Fine, five months if you count the four months I wasn’t talking to you. Don’t get all upset that I won’t talk to you now. I’m pretty sure I fostered no false expectations.’

Hannibal said nothing. He waited.

After a minute of this, something in Will snapped loose. He zipped up his nylon jacket. ‘You should go home,’ he said hollowly. ‘I’ll be fine from here.’

‘I wouldn’t like to. It’s still early. I have many patients tomorrow, and I might not see you.’

‘You see me every day. Maybe we both need a breather.’

So this was how it was. Hannibal had offended him by daring merely to ask a question—again—and as punishment he would be discarded and shut off for who knew how long. Days, perhaps.

He stood. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘I did not realise you found my companionship suffocating. An oversight.’

‘Okay,’ Will laughed, but not in the way Hannibal enjoyed. The bitter note at the tail-end of it turned his stomach. ‘Fine.’

Hannibal collected his things in silence. He left the thermos, but he took the batteries. He didn’t know what he would do with them.

He did not hear from Will again until the next morning. He was having breakfast, watching the swirling snowflakes behind the dining room window, too thready to last when they touched the warm ground. Winter had receded overnight, the spike in temperature a small victory for the encroaching spring. It would be weeks yet, but it was coming: Hannibal could feel it in his bones.

His lips set into a thin line as he eyed the caller ID. He considered briefly not picking up to see if Will would redial. In the end, he couldn’t risk it.

‘Hey,’ Will said. ‘I know you said you had patients, but maybe you’d have some time in the evening to drop by? You left your thermos.’

‘I have appointments in the evening and through the afternoon.’

He heard Will swallow. ‘And now?’

Hannibal would regret this, he realised. If he said yes, if he went to Wolf Trap, if he saw Will in this new house that Will loved, he would only lose ground again.

‘Now would be fine,’ he said.

‘Oh. Good,’ said Will. From the shyness in his voice, the coyness of the smile that bled through, you would think he had no idea that he’d won.

At the point when Will first moved into Wolf Trap, Hannibal had gone without therapy for several months. Doctor Du Maurier had been taken ill after an unfortunate incident in her office that resulted in the death of a patient, and she had suspended her practice indefinitely. Hannibal called every couple of weeks to express his concern for her and his readiness to resume therapy at her convenience. While he understood she would need time to contend with what had occurred, he did not believe wallowing in self-recrimination would do her any good. She had done a good job killing her patient and managed to stay calm enough after; she should have been pleased. His calls usually went straight to voicemail.

Soon after Will's move, she finally phoned him back.

Predictably, she refused to talk about her patient, even when Hannibal had sat himself in a new armchair across from her and fixed her with a curious gaze. He would not allow himself to be disappointed. Doctor Du Maurier was a private person, and the intimacy of the moments they had shared over the body would by necessity remain shrouded in silence. In any case, the event had resulted in a new understanding between them, a new clarity which Hannibal believed would be conducive to successful therapy. Also, he had been allowed now not merely behind the doors to her office, but inside her own house, even if she'd taken care to furnish the room they now occupied in entirely new movables. They still smelled of the furniture store.

'How are you, Hannibal?' she asked. It occurred to Hannibal he had not been asked the question in months, not in a tone that invited a true answer.

He thought about it.

'I have been considering fatherhood,' he said.

She forced her face to remain impassive, but some of the surprise still registered. 'Is there anything that inspired you to?'

Hannibal inclined his head in confirmation. 'My friend recently revealed to me that he believes his desire for a child will forever go unfulfilled. Trying to understand what might have led him to this belief, I have found it useful to consider my own feelings on the matter.'

'It can be useful,' Doctor Du Maurier agreed. 'But attempting to understand another person's mind through the prism of our own experience can also be misleading.'

'I am aware that Will's psychological make-up is very different to my own.' Hannibal hesitated, then revealed, 'His name is Will Graham. Perhaps you have heard of him. He works at the FBI Academy, where he lectures young agents on the criminal mind.'

This amused her. 'Perhaps your new friend's psychological make-up is not quite so alien to your own.'

Unfortunately, Hannibal did not think so. 'Perhaps,' he said sourly. 'Will's ability to empathise with anyone gives him an enviable ease with the uncommon and the unconventional. Even the deviant. But in some ways, he is a very traditional man. He sees the steps to becoming a father as unattainable to him: a committed relationship, biological compatibility, healthy genetic material he'd be willing to bestow on a child. As long as he is lacking, he will not consider himself worthy of satisfying the drive.'

'Hannibal,' she said with gentle chastisement. 'This is your hour. Not Will Graham's.'

Hannibal took offence at this but did not show it. 'It could be easily argued I am lacking in precisely the ways Will Graham is,' he pointed out.

She raised an eyebrow. ‘Are you suggesting your genetic material is not worth passing onto a child?’

‘No. Merely that I am sure there is an argument for saying so.’

Doctor Du Maurier fixed him with a look. She was trying to read something in his posture and face that she would not find. ‘How does the idea of fatherhood make you feel, Hannibal?’

‘I feel disconnected from the concept. I understand Will’s fascination on an intellectual level, but I struggle with the feeling of it.’

‘That upsets you.’

‘It irritates me, yes.’

Doctor Du Maurier smiled. ‘There will always be emotional realities that remain impenetrable to us, Hannibal.’

‘Not to Will.’

‘Perhaps not to Will. But to you.’

Hannibal returned her smile. Privately, however, he thought this was defeatist.

An idea was beginning to form in him. As much as he valued the time he spent conversing with his patients, he had always believed that taking action was ultimately far more effective than self-reflection. If he wished to understand Will, he would need to take action.

He had himself an experiment to run.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Next week, we're going back to present day to check in on Amelie's weekend at Wolf Trap.

Eleven weeks before the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

The walk back was easier because she already knew the best puddles to choose. She still eyed the ground carefully before each leap, not very keen on falling again. That was how she saw the snail, or what was left of one. It had a beautiful whirl of a shell, dotted with colour and cracked horribly from a shoe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Five.
Eleven weeks before the Christmas Eve party.

Amelie canted her head, measured the distance, and jumped.

Water sprayed around her. Buster leapt away, startled, then came back when he saw she wasn't scared. He started to drink from the puddle before Amelie edged him away with a foot.

The puddle was satisfyingly deep and murky. The toes of her rainboots disappeared completely in the liquid dirt, which gurgled when she rocked back onto her heels.

'There's a big one there,' Will said. 'Can you make it?'

Amelie looked. 'Probably,' she said, although she didn't feel so sure. It was far away. 'Watch out.'

She jumped. The mud in the puddle slid under her feet, forcing her off balance. The splash reached as high as her collar; something wet smacked against her cheek, and one of her knees sank to the ground with a squelch. A bird in a tree fluttered into flight. Buster gave another bark, then ran up to her to see if she was okay. The new dog, Winston, did the same, but unlike Buster, he didn't try to jump on her, which she appreciated. He wasn't small.

'I made it.' The black stains on her pants were impressive. She remarked sadly, 'Though I'm all dirty now.'

'Yeah. Better head back. Maybe on dry ground this time?'

Amelie shook her head. 'Puddles only.'

'Okay.'

The forest was her favourite thing about Wolf Trap, except, of course, for the dogs. Amelie used to have a dog herself, back when she was younger, and Will always made out now like the new dogs were *hers*, too, which just wasn't the case. How could the dogs be Amelie's if they didn't live with her?

When Amelie used to have a dog, they would bring her to Wolf Trap sometimes, she and Will. The dog's name was Belle—she might have been called something else before Amelie rechristened her, but that wasn't important—and Belle loved the forest in Wolf Trap, too. She was decidedly Amelie's: she came to her first every morning. The only bad thing about Belle was that she didn't understand the point of playing catch, and that she died when Amelie was six.

While Amelie liked Will's new dogs just fine, she did feel that choosing to adopt them was a dishonour to Belle. She also thought seven dogs were too many dogs for any normal person to have, and a clear sign of a problem.

The walk back was easier because she already knew the best puddles to choose. She still eyed the ground carefully before each leap, not very keen on falling again. That was how she saw the snail, or what was left of one. It had a beautiful whirl of a shell, dotted with colour and cracked horribly from a shoe.

She scooped her up and showed Will.

'Do you think she'll live?' she asked. The snail wasn't really a *she* because snails weren't one or the other but both at once, but Amelie always said *she* in Lithuanian and anything else sounded wrong.

'Hard to say,' said Will. 'You're our snail expert.'

She put the snail closer to her face. She looked alive, at least.

'Yes,' she declared. She hoped the snail would live, or she'd feel foolish for calling it wrong.

Because she was carrying the snail now, Amelie abstained from jumping into puddles. She wouldn't risk worsening the snail's injuries.

'We need to do surgery right away,' she reminded Will. 'The very moment we get back.'

'Right after you change out of these clothes. We need to give them a quick wash before all this mud sets in, or else I'll get a phone call I won't enjoy.'

Amelie didn't like this idea. She'd brought a change of clothes with her for tomorrow, but then all she'd have left was the stuff kept in her Wolf Trap drawer, infantile clothes she used to wear last year. Will's plan also required Will to handle the clothes she had on now, and she could feel the puddle water had soaked through the whole of it, even her underwear.

'I'll just put it in a bag,' she said, looking at the snail and not at Will. 'Dad will wash it at home anyway.'

There was a startled laugh from Will. 'Who?'

‘My *father,*’ she explained stiffly, although really she was embarrassed. ‘What?’

‘Since when do you call him *dad*?’

‘Since we live in America. I’m just speaking American.’

A hand on her shoulder halted her mid-step. She wiggled out of its hold because she hated Will. ‘What?’ she repeated, louder.

‘You’re telling me you’re speaking English with him? When did that happen?’

‘It’s not your business.’

‘It is my business when you’re doing something stupid. You let the language go now, you might never get it back. You don’t just throw away a bit of identity like that. You definitely don’t throw it right into Tėtis’s face, either. Have a bit of respect.’

Tears welled in Amelie’s eyes that had to be blinked away quickly. Her hands started to fist involuntarily, and she had to force them flat to stop herself crushing her snail. She wished it was Will she were holding, that Will had been cursed by something mystical and horrible to be the size of a snail or a frog, and that she could crush him between her fingers until his brains spilled out.

‘You’re always making me call people by your own invented names,’ she managed through a tight throat. ‘Like calling Margot my aunt even though she’s my birth mother or calling *you* dad even though you’re not at all. I’ve decided I’m not doing any of that anymore. I’m going to decide now what everyone is called, and you’re going to be Will, and Tėtis is going to be Dad now, and you’re not going to call me strange things like *sugar bug* anymore.’

For a moment, Will said nothing. Amelie was afraid of looking at his face, so she kept her eyes on the snail, and on the dirt-covered tips of her rainboots.

‘Let’s go before it starts to rain again,’ he said finally, and his voice was so weak and strained that it didn’t sound like him at all.

Back at the house, they put the snail under a magnifying lens at Will’s little window desk. With the same pliers he used to craft his lures, Will prised the cracked fragments of shell from the snail’s soft body and dropped them one by one on a porcelain plate. Amelie stood and watched without a word, not wanting to distract him, holding her breath when a particularly finnicky piece threatened to drive itself into flesh. Will got them all, even the tiniest ones, and Amelie wondered how strange it was that he would use the same tools and the same precision to save her snail as he did to catch and kill fish.

Post-op, they put the snail in a Tupperware they’d cut breathing holes into, along with some leaves and a piece of wet gauze. Amelie dropped a bit of apple in there, too, though it was unlikely the snail would eat. If Amelie knew anything about snails—and she knew a lot—the

snail would curl up and stay still for days as she recovered. She would only eat again once the shell had closed over her body, if ever it did.

As she lay on the rug by the fire, Amelie watched the snail. The fire warmed her feet. The dogs nosed at the container a little but soon lost interest. Amelie wondered if they could tell whether the snail would live just by smelling her.

'Five minutes on the fish,' Will said from the doorway to the kitchen. He clicked the light on, but Amelie liked the dark and whined, so he flicked it off again. 'You hear that? What's that sound?'

Amelie looked around, unsure what he was talking about. 'Oil?' she asked.

'No, the—' He eyed each dog in turn, then peered out the window. 'Huh.'

Just then, his phone rang. He looked at the screen, then took it to another room and shut the door. Amelie could make out the murmur of his voice saying *Jack.*

Amelie despised Jack Crawford. She thought that a serial killer should have killed him by now, considering his profession. She had thought about dropping the idea into the comment section on Tattle Crime, where it might be picked up by someone appropriate. She was aware such a thing as IP addresses existed, though, even if the movies never made it clear how that worked. If someone at the FBI tracked her comment back to her, they would tell Will, and she would definitely get in trouble for it; technically speaking, she wasn't allowed on Tattle Crime at all, though she was fairly sure Tėtis knew she went and didn't mind.

When Will came out again, she knew what he would say before he said it.

'Listen, sugar—Amelie,' he said. 'Jack needs me at a scene. It's—it's pretty bad, and I—I think we're going to have cut the weekend short a little. I'm sorry.'

Amelie shrugged.

'Uh, I'm going to call Tėtis—I'm going to call Hannibal to come get you. We do have a little more time to have dinner, yeah? And maybe next weekend we can pick it up where we left off?'

'Next weekend is Adela's birthday, so I'm sleeping over.'

'Oh. The weekend after then.' When she didn't answer, he cleared his throat. 'I think the fish should be ready now.'

'I'm not really hungry. I'll just eat at home.'

'Okay.' There was an awkward moment when he lingered in the doorway. Amelie thought to say something.

'Is it the Chesapeake Ripper?' she asked.

She knew he wouldn't like it but hadn't anticipated how much. Will could make the air sizzle with only his eyes or the way he squared his shoulders; he had only shouted at her once as far as she could remember, but when he became quietly angry, it made skin crawl and space collapse.

'Where did you get that name from?'

Amelie shrugged. 'Everyone knows the Chesapeake Ripper,' she said.

'No, everyone doesn't. Where did you hear the name?'

'Tommy told me the Ripper killed our uncle. So don't tell me it's not my business.'

Will didn't. He sighed instead and rested his head against the doorjamb. 'It's not the Ripper,' he said. 'If the Ripper is killing anymore, he's keeping it quiet, and if he killed Mason Verger, he did it because of who Mason Verger was as a person. He doesn't care about family names, and he keeps any link between his targets minimal to muddle the waters. If you or Tommy are worried about him, don't be. The FBI's Ripper expert says so. Okay?'

'Okay,' Amelie agreed easily. She had not worried. She had never really worried about death. It seemed to her an entirely abstract thing, something found in mournsome pictures or great tales of war, and if anything, it pleased her to think that her life might someday bear its mark.

When Tėtis pulled up at the front of the house, Amelie was already waiting on the porch steps. She hurried past him to put her bag in the trunk, then opened the front door on the passenger side and settled herself inside. He'd shut off the engine, but the seat was still warm.

Through the window, she saw the dark of their figures against the brightness spilling from the house; could see their straight backs, the dogs nosing at their knees, the way their hands moved, but she could not hear their voices well enough to make out the words. It made her think of shadow theatre. Now, Will was giving Tėtis the Tupperware with the snail. Now, he was rubbing his neck, explaining something in a hushed voice, and Tėtis was still and silent, and then he was saying a thing back and turning away again.

When the door opened and Tėtis slid inside, Amelie didn't look at him. She stared at Will on the porch, waving at her. She didn't wave back.

'Does our new snail have a name?' Tėtis asked once the house had disappeared behind them. The road was poor here, uneven and potholed, but in a few short moments they would be out on the highway.

'She might still die, so there's no point,' Amelie answered in English. 'If she lives, I'll think of one.'

'And if she dies, she will die nameless.'

'She should try hard to live, then.' Amelie wasn't going to explain herself to him. Tėtis had no notion of how to do right by snails; if not for Amelie, he would still be keeping the whole

of the snail garden as his own personal reservoir of appetizers. He wasn't allowed to eat the snails anymore, but that didn't mean Amelie trusted him to feel for them the way she did.

'What shall we do tomorrow?' The first light from the highway lit up the contours of his face. Amelie looked at him now that she felt a little more composed. 'Other than take your new outfit to the cleaner's.'

'It was Will's fault,' she said bitterly.

'I know.' A quick smile passed over Tėtis's features. 'Tell me, do you call Will by his first name in his presence, or are we being private about it?'

'I told him I wasn't going to call him *dad,*' said Amelie, which was all she could say. She hadn't actually had the courage to call Will *Will* to his face. 'Do you think he was upset about it?'

'I'm sure he was devastated. But I imagine that was your intention.'

Amelie rested her forehead against the window pane and squeezed her eyes shut. The lights of the passing cars drew colourful shapes on her eyelids. She couldn't decide if Tėtis was happy about what she'd accomplished or dissatisfied with it.

Amelie worried, sometimes, that Tėtis did not hate Will nearly as much as she did. He did hate him, of course, because Will made hate easy; but there were occasions on which he said a thing, or smiled a certain way, that filled Amelie's stomach with a sickening sort of doubt.

'I'm hungry,' she said. 'Is there dinner?'

'You haven't eaten?'

'Not since school,' she lied. 'I guess Will forgot.'

Tėtis said nothing, but his expression turned empty. Amelie's lip quirked up. She bit her tongue to stop the satisfaction from showing more fully on her face.

'Will's ability to keep to his commitments is minimal,' he said after a while. 'As we have seen today. I know you are responsible enough to remind both of you about meals, Amelie, or to prepare yourself something in the absence of Will's effort. You are not to go half a day without eating.'

This was the problem with Will, Amelie thought furiously. If he were in the car with them, he would be the one getting told off, but he was never in the car with them. He got to live a life that was separate, that did not have to be negotiated with competing rules and priorities, that cared nothing about how Tėtis and Amelie felt or what they thought.

'That's not fair,' she said in Lithuanian, and kicked at the door of the car to relieve her anger. The language felt strange on her tongue after weeks of going without. She thought about ordering Tėtis not to tell Will about the Lithuanian, only she did not want to draw special attention to it.

Tėtis did not comment, but the blank look disappeared from his face. ‘Take your shoes off before kicking at leather, please,’ he said.

Amelie did take her shoes off. She dropped them to the floor of the car from high up. They made a satisfying sound when the heels hit against one another.

‘I will make you *cepelinai* when we get home,’ Tėtis promised.

Amelie put her hands up triumphantly and kicked the door again with that same emotion. There had been little to enjoy about the day, but at least the fact remained that *cepelinai* were here favourite, and she never got to have them.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Next week, we're back in the past again: Hannibal plots, Margot enters the story, and Will shows a new face.

Eleven years and five months before the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

> *As she pulled off her jacket, he stayed and watched. The rounded line of her stomach interested him. It would have been merely the suggestion of a life now, with a tadpole's shape and the barest of heartbeats.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Six.
Eleven years and five months before the Christmas Eve party.

Will had always struggled with seeing through his commitments. Early on in their acquaintance, Hannibal had recognised that while Will generally put significant stock into timely arrival for appointments, holding open doors and offering to help carry bags—all polite, surface-level frippery—the pretence would tear loose at the precise moment an event manifested which Will felt truly serious about.

The night that Margot's secret was revealed, Hannibal had been waiting on Will, very aware that he was waiting on Will because of Will's work.

Dinner was cooling on the kitchen counter. Dessert was slowly but inevitably spoiling in the fridge. Hannibal sipped his wine and wondered what manipulation it would take to spur in Will the same loyalty for Hannibal as Will had for his work. Now that he had been denied for the second time, following a second psychiatric evaluation, his own place within the FBI's ranks, Will's desperation found for him a new drive toward at least equipping fitter minds with the tools of justice he himself could never wield. He would call ahead to warn Hannibal he'd be late, he would show up sleep-deprived and useless from staying up grading essays, he would scrap the careful design of a year's worth of coursework because he'd decide it was not good enough. In a way, Hannibal found this romantic. Any man might choose to dedicate his life to serving a higher cause, and do so to the detriment of personal relationships, care for the self, or time for life's simplest pleasures; but to aspire so painfully to something that was anathema to who you were and what you needed, to be told you were unfit for the cause, and still to waste yourself away on a lesser cousin of said cause—that could be accomplished by only the most stubborn of one-track minds. It titillated Hannibal to think he knew such a mind, and that he was somewhat privy to its workings.

The doorbell rang. Hannibal set down his wine, wiped the counter clean, then languidly made his way to the front door. Will had tested his patience tonight; it was only right that Hannibal show minimal haste.

When he opened the door, he was heartbroken to see Will wasn't there.

Instead, Margot Verger was pushing past him. A sizeable travel bag hung off her shoulder.

'I need to stay here tonight,' she declared. Hannibal did not take offense: her voice was high, her breath uneven. She was terrified but too proud to let Hannibal know it.

'Of course,' he said.

Wide-eyed, she stared at him, expecting questions. Hannibal did not ask any.

He led her to the guest bedroom, where he set the bag down on the chair and pulled back the curtains. In the ensuite bathroom, he showed her where to find fresh towels and shampoo. He rarely entertained overnight guests, but he had taken special care recently to outfit the room in expectation of her needs. He had known Margot would be coming eventually.

As she pulled off her jacket, he stayed and watched. The rounded line of her stomach interested him. It would have been merely the suggestion of a life now, with a tadpole's shape and the barest of heartbeats. When she saw him looking, she turned away. Barely the idea of a child, yet already she was growing possessive. It made Hannibal hopeful for the future.

This had been the deal: Hannibal would provide access to doctors who were not on her brother's payroll. Hannibal would provide the sperm. Hannibal would, though this had gone unsaid, provide aid after the inevitable discovery of the pregnancy by her family.

'And what do you get from this?' she had asked him when he'd first offered. 'I get an heir. I get a future. I get—'

'A powerful motivation to protect that future,' Hannibal had supplied. 'Be it maternal instinct or a drive to secure what should be yours, I do believe this project will give you the enticement you have needed for so long.'

'Enticement to kill my brother.'

'Yes.' Hannibal had smiled. 'And I get the satisfaction of knowing my therapy was successful.'

In the mellow light reflecting off the gold fittings in the guest bathroom, she stood cowered now, shoulders stooped with the weight of the task ahead of her. Hannibal observed the slant of her neck, curious about the tension that pulled at it: was it at the prospect of killing her brother, or at the prospect of failing?

'Mason found out,' she said quietly. 'He knows it was you, too.'

'Of course he does. He was always going to find out eventually, Margot. Do the rest of your family know?'

'They don't know the details.' She smiled sourly. 'To them, I am the prodigal daughter returned at last. Considering my—*pathology*—getting knocked up is hardly a stain on my character. The opposite, actually.'

‘It will be good to have their support,’ Hannibal pointed out. A thought occurred to him. ‘Why don’t you invite Mason to come in for a session with me? I think he could find therapy useful. Perhaps I can help him understand that this child does not need to be a threat, but an opportunity.’

‘Children,’ she said.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Twins. I had my ultrasound. And I got my blood results back. They think one of them might be a girl. I can’t have a girl.’

‘You can,’ said Hannibal. A boy would suit Margot’s needs better, but a girl would suit Hannibal’s needs the same, so he did not much care.

She straightened her back. She pushed out her chin. ‘The girls in my family don’t tend to do so well, Doctor. I can’t let that happen to—’

‘You won’t let it happen to her.’ He met her eye. ‘I have enormous faith in you, Margot.’

She held his gaze longer than he’d have expected it. His faith, he was sure, was well-founded.

‘I’m going to shower now.’

‘I will leave you to it. Please let me know if you need anything.’

He came downstairs to fix her a plate. As far as he was aware, she had not experienced much nausea and maintained a healthy appetite, which would need to be doubly sated if indeed she was having twins. He threw together a quick spinach salad to accompany the meal, for the extra folic acid.

He was just finishing up the dressing when the doorbell rang for the second time that night.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Will was saying before Hannibal had managed to pull the door open fully. ‘I got caught up—’

Hannibal had been upset with him before, but Margot’s arrival had stirred excitement. Although the source was the scandal and not the child, he felt nevertheless a sudden closeness with Will—who would have felt that same excitement, Hannibal thought, if he were told of a child quickening in a partner’s belly—if he were told of *children,* plural, a boy and, perhaps, a girl.

He didn’t let him continue with the excuse but kissed him instead. Will tensed momentarily, then came easily, allowing Hannibal to draw him inside, to lean him against the wall, to settle splayed hands on his chest, warmed from the rush.

‘Well, hi,’ he laughed when Hannibal let up. His cheeks had gone pink, and his eyes glistened. This was what the excitement would look like, thought Hannibal. It would colour his face, yes, but more importantly his gaze. ‘Not quite the welcome I expected. A door in my face, maybe.’

‘I would not.’

‘No,’ Will agreed. ‘You’re going to make me think you have no standards.’

‘I have very high standards.’

‘If you did,’ said Will as he started pulling off his jacket, ‘you wouldn’t kiss the guy showing up an hour late.’

‘You’ve already ruined dinner,’ Hannibal noted. ‘It would be only a further slight if I allowed you to ruin the rest of the night.’

‘Oh, the rest of the night?’ Will’s teeth showed in his smile. Hannibal thought sometimes the only reason he ever kissed Will was to feel the press of those teeth on his lip. ‘I didn’t realise we had *rest of the night* plans.’

Hannibal allowed him the joke. He had no intention of taking Will to bed tonight, as Will well knew. It was not that Hannibal did not enjoy the pleasures of sex, or that he did not think Will could be persuaded; he simply had no interest in handing over another victory. Will’s entire manner was designed perfectly to entice: the shamelessness lived in his toothy smiles, his hands where they flattened against surfaces, the buttons at the collar he’d forget about. Hannibal worried occasionally about taking him out in public at all, lest he become victim to leering and misguided propositions. Fortunately, it seemed as though Hannibal’s presence at his side scared off opportunists, as none ever manifested.

A stair creaked above them.

‘Do you happen to have—’

Will’s head whipped to her, and the whole event turned immediately comical in Hannibal’s eyes: Margot’s negligee peeking out from behind the towel she carried, Will’s stare, Hannibal’s own positioning between Margot on the stairway and Will at the door.

‘Never mind,’ Margot said, and turned to retreat.

‘Stay right there,’ demanded Will. ‘Who are you?’

Hannibal decided he should probably interfere before this turned any uglier, however much the idea entertained him. It might not be good for the foetus, and it would be no good for Will, whose recent professional failures would have frayed his nerves.

‘This is Margot. I can assure you that nothing untoward has happened between us,’ he explained, then smiled against his best efforts. ‘Although I suppose she *is* having my baby.’

The Adam’s apple in Will’s throat moved as he swallowed. The sound was larger in the silence.

‘Study,’ he ordered finally, then held up a hand when Hannibal took a step toward him. ‘I *strongly* suggest you keep a safe distance.’

If Hannibal found the warning amusing, it was because he didn't really know Will yet.

In the study, Will made a beeline for the drink cabinet. He poured himself the scotch Hannibal kept mostly for show—he rather disliked the stuff unless the mood particularly called for it—and swallowed it all down. Hannibal had not seen signs of a dependence before but wondered now if Will's relationship with alcohol could be played to his benefit, somehow.

'Margot is in a rather tricky situation with her brother,' Hannibal explained. 'He does not approve of the pregnancy.'

Will poured himself another drink. 'I should meet him. Peas in a pod.'

'You are not,' said Hannibal sharply. 'I don't know how long she will be staying. Perhaps four, five months—until the birth.'

Will's eyes glazed over when he did the maths. The anger on his face burnt brighter. Hannibal felt horribly compelled to step closer to him despite the warning and force him into acting on it. If he chose to spit at Hannibal, or throw the crystal at him, Hannibal decided he would snap his neck. If he struck him, Hannibal would relent and take him to bed.

'So we were together when this happened.'

'Yes. I offered to donate sperm to help Margot become a mother. I would like to help her see the pregnancy through, considering the circumstances, but I have no plans to be involved in the child's life. Or children, as may be the case.'

'You're having twins? Mazel tov.'

'*Margot* is, yes.'

Will's mouth twisted in a snarl. Hannibal had never seen the expression on him. It changed his features, turned the smooth and youthful wrong and nightmarish, and it showed his teeth.

'Are you angry that I kept it from you?' asked Hannibal. 'You keep things from me, Will.'

'What the fuck do I keep from you? Not secretly getting a patient pregnant on a whim, do I?'

Hannibal almost did a double-take. He had not mentioned to Will how he knew Margot, and it did not seem as though Will was aware of the jump he'd made, so used was he to his instincts. It was impressive—and a little concerning.

'You have recently failed to get onto the agent programme again. There is unlikely to be a third opportunity.'

Will turned away from him to look at the fire. Somewhere in the house, there was the sound of a tap being opened. Margot had gone to the kitchen to get water.

'You refuse to share your professional failures and refuse to discuss personal ones. Are you really angry that I didn't tell you? Or are you angry because I have achieved something you

want and can't have?'

'You haven't achieved shit,' Will bit out, 'except to piss me off. Is that why you did it? No, that's—' he laughed. 'That's insane. But it does feel like you did it to spite me. To take my dream and show me how fucking easy it was for you, and pervert it—and you don't even want the kid. If you'd gone and done it and wanted it, then—'

'I didn't do it to spite you,' Hannibal said truthfully.

'No, I know.' The light of the fire made out the sheen of tears in Will's eyes. 'I'm not *quite* self-centred enough to think that.'

'I have no interest in being a father to these children,' Hannibal assured him. 'But I am not averse to the idea in the future.'

Will's next laugh came out wet. 'Wow. Yeah, I really don't think we're going to be together long enough for that to be a conversation.'

Hannibal suspected this was true. His relationships had always tended toward either short and intense or drawn-out but non-committed. That Will would say so aloud felt like a slap, though, and he scrambled for a way to endear himself to Will, to give him a reason to stay past what he'd planned for—if anyone was going to call an end to this, surely it should be Hannibal.

'You have every right to resent me.' He did; Hannibal had no problem staying with him even if he was resented.

'I need to go.'

'You don't. You've had too much to drink to drive now.'

'I'll get a cab. Or I'll walk. I just need to get out of here.'

'Will—'

The moment Hannibal took a step forward, Will scrambled away from him, a desperate panic in his eyes. 'Don't—don't touch me. I can't—you don't understand. I need to—I can't be with you right now, not when I feel like—'

'Like what, Will?'

'Like I want your goddamn unborn children to *die,*' he whispered. 'Like I—like I could do it. Or like I know how I could make *you* do it.'

Hannibal blinked, genuinely too surprised to find the words. Will's eyes, fixed on his, were wide and strange, like a fairy creature's.

He pushed past him and all but ran. A moment later, the front door slammed shut behind him.

Hannibal found Mason Verger a highly unpleasant person, even beyond what he'd already known about him.

Easily distracted and unable to stay still, he flitted about Hannibal's office, picking up his personal possessions while he ran his own commentary. There was a childishness there that Hannibal did think might eventually respond to therapy. Too bad Margot would hopefully be killing him before Hannibal had the chance to see progress.

'I *should* know something about my sister's baby daddy, don't you agree?'

'I do agree. I am happy to answer any questions you might have. If you could sit down.'

Finally, Mason slumped into the chair opposite. He was sitting on it sideways, his legs flung over the armrest. Hannibal did his best not to flinch.

'Okay, question one. Are you stupid? I wouldn't want the baby to be stupid, you see. If you are, and it's going to be, then it might be a mercy to nip the whole thing in the bud. Wouldn't you say?'

'There does seem to be a strong genetic component to intelligence,' Hannibal agreed. 'Although it is difficult to draw a clear line between nature and nurture. Intelligent parents often create an environment that breeds intelligence in turn.'

'Margot says you're not going to be around to do much more breeding.' Mason's lips formed the moue of artificial upset. 'I should have your head for it, you know—to knock up my sister and then abandon the baby—!'

Hannibal held in the sigh. Mason had a natural talent for testing patience, and Hannibal's was already strained. He had a house guest disturbing his routines and putting things back in all the wrong places. He had a cold. He had not heard from Will in three days.

'How does the idea of Margot having a child make you feel, Mason?'

'Ah, I don't like talking about feelings. We're men, aren't we?' His voice had gone deep and terse before he collapsed into giggles. 'No, no, I am sorry. Your whole job is talking about feelings. I wouldn't want to offend you.'

'It's alright. I am not offended.'

'I *felt* pretty damn mad about it—I was thinking of arranging an accident, you know, or a surprise surgery. A baby shower gift! But I said to myself, Mason. Wait and see. Don't do anything rash, or the bad man might actually come and shoot your head off. They make them like that at the FBI, don't they? Trigger-happy?'

Hannibal, who had not really been paying attention, straightened in his chair.

Registering his interest, Mason grinned. 'Oh—I didn't tell you?' He smacked his lips in self-censure. 'My, my. A very mean man paid me a visit yesterday. He said he worked with the FBI—very precise wording, wasn't it, and good on him, because I found out later he's not an actual agent. Too unstable. I don't know why they'd think that. He seemed plenty stable to

me when he put a gun to my head.' He showed Hannibal his hand, fingers arranged as though he were holding a pistol. 'What a sure hand! Didn't shake at all.'

'I sincerely hope you did not hurt him, Mason,' Hannibal said.

'Oh, no, no. Even I know better than to have an FBI man murdered. He told me if he saw me anywhere near your house, he'd shoot me on sight, you know. I hope he didn't mean your office, too.' He laughed again, loud and high-pitched, then mocked, 'Is he your boyfriend?'

Pride bloomed in Hannibal, hot and near-choking. 'Yes,' he said. 'Will enjoys making threats. He does not necessarily follow through on them.'

'No, I could tell. Posturing, huh? But he could make trouble for me, you know. If you could get him under control, that would be just swell. You'd do your baby's uncle the favour, wouldn't you?'

Hannibal inclined his head. 'I will if you promise me something, Mason.'

'Pinky promise!'

Hannibal leaned forward in his chair. 'Don't interfere with the pregnancy. Allow the children to be born and give yourself a chance to see how you feel. You might find you have a use for them after all.'

Mason twiddled his thumbs as he considered it. 'You're right, of course. You can have more fun with a kiddo that's breathing and tottering about, can't you? Test out that nature or nurture thing you were blabbering about.'

Hannibal gave him a smile. It came easily. While he hoped Margot would dispose of Mason before he managed to find any use for the children, in any case Hannibal's experiment was yielding results.

He may not have discovered very much about his own feelings toward parenthood, but he had certainly come closer to understanding *something* about Will—though the nebulous shape of it was a long way from definition.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Next week, it's finally time for Will's POV as we join him for mediation. I'm sure they'll make good progress.

Ten weeks before the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

> *He'd realised recently that they had now been divorcing longer than they'd been married. Wasn't that a thought. He'd spent an evening drinking to it, which dulled the headache he'd been battling all day until it didn't anymore. He'd curled up in bed then and tried to decide whether to start sobbing or laughing.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seven.
Ten weeks before the Christmas Eve party.

Will should have known from the moment he'd suggested they sign a prenup and Hannibal had said, *don't be perverse.*

There was that joke, wasn't there, that went something like, *marriage is a death sentence.* No—marriage is a *life* sentence. Just before signing his name on the marriage certificate, he had had a flash of panic—or a flash of sound fucking thinking for once—that told him very clearly, *don't.* He didn't listen, and here he was.

He'd realised recently that they had now been divorcing longer than they'd been married. Wasn't that a thought. He'd spent an evening drinking to it, which dulled the headache he'd been battling all day until it didn't anymore. He'd curled up in bed then and tried to decide whether to start sobbing or laughing.

In the end, he did neither. Instead, he imagined himself in old age, hobbling up the stairs to their mediator's office. At the top of the stairs would be Hannibal, bent-over himself, skin sagged over bone, and he would call out to Will, *it's division of assets again today, is it?* And Will would make it to him despite the arthritis, and he would shove him down the stairs.

When he showed up for mediation on Wednesday, he saw the very same scene, only Hannibal looked strong and solid at the top of the stairway, and Will thought any attempt at shoving would accomplish little except to bring him pain. His head was already throbbing, and every muscle in his body felt inflamed. He must have caught something. Everyone at the academy was getting sick; it was the season for it.

'She's very talented,' the mediator was saying.

Will blinked, momentarily confused before he remembered where he was. He ran his fingers over the threading of the chair cushion, grounding himself. Whatever it was he'd caught, it

made him prone to disassociating, and it was not as though he'd ever been all that present. Doing things with his hands helped: crafting lures, gutting fish, ironing Amelie's dresses.

'Isn't she?' Hannibal had flicked to the next picture. 'I should bring the originals next time. The photographs don't do the shading justice.'

They were on their second mediator now. Will had demanded they ditch the last one when it became clear she'd got hooked on the narcoleptic that was Hannibal Lecter's charm and abandoned all professional principle to side with him on anything from the division of assets to whether green was a good colour on Will. Will had gone to considerable effort to ensure the new mediator's background, sexual orientation and interests all rendered her an unlikely victim of Hannibal's draw, and still he was watching the very same thing happen right before his eyes. Although she'd clung to impartiality where it mattered, it was fast becoming apparent she thought Will didn't know what was good for him if he wanted a divorce in the first place.

Will's lawyer had strongly advised him several times now to drop the mediation charade and just go to court.

'A moment comes you have to acknowledge you won't be able to work it out without litigation,' he'd said. 'We are several goddamn years past that moment.'

Will could not go to court. Oh, he didn't mind very much that he'd have to lie extensively under oath—it would hardly be the most illegal thing he'd done in this marriage—but he knew Hannibal would quite rightly insist on co-ordinating their lies, and that would require time alone together, which Will avoided like the plague.

Hannibal had tucked away his phone and came to sit opposite Will. The mediator smoothed out her dress.

'And how are you today, Will?'

'My lawyer told me yesterday my spouse was an uncooperative nightmare,' he said, looking at Hannibal, 'and that if he were me, he thinks he'd have snapped by now and drowned him in his fifteen-thousand-dollar bathtub. So, that felt pretty good.'

'Will's lawyer doesn't like me,' Hannibal explained with a smile. 'Are we still litigating the bathtub today, or shall we move on?'

'I think we all need a break from the bathtub.' There was a pleading note to the mediator's voice. 'Hannibal, you mentioned in your last phone call that you wanted to discuss the houses?'

'What houses?' Will sat up straight. 'What are you talking about? The houses are separate property—'

'Since we have both spent time in them and contributed to the upkeep, both the Wolf Trap and the Baltimore house should be considered comingled,' Hannibal disagreed. 'I do think this is more important to discuss than the bathtub. Thank you, Agnes.'

‘No,’ said Will, fury brewing fast. ‘No, because first of all, you did everything you could to avoid spending more than five minutes in Wolf Trap. Second of all, it doesn’t matter, because it was all agreed on in the prenup—’

‘Ah,’ Hannibal smiled. ‘I explained to Agnes, but I suppose I must have forgotten to mention. My lawyer has advised me that the prenup can be considered unlawful if it was signed under duress.’

Will’s fingers tightened on the cushion. His nails drove in.

‘What the fuck kind of duress were you under?’ he spat.

‘Will,’ the mediator chastised.

‘I don’t think we need to discuss the details here.’ Hannibal cast a look at the mediator that was meant to come off as subtle and really wasn’t. ‘It is all in the past. I would like to renegotiate certain details from the prenup, that is all.’

Will bit into his tongue to halt the expletive. He wasn’t going to help Hannibal construct this new narrative, and letting his temper dictate his words would do just that. He wondered how far Hannibal would push it: was he going to paint Will as merely emotionally abusive, or physically, too? No, the latter would be too hard to walk back from, and Hannibal needed the option for when he next wanted to change strategies. At the end of the day, none of it mattered to him: not the bathtub or the houses, not who’d been at fault and when, not anything. All that mattered to Hannibal was drawing this out.

When Will had first served him papers, he’d looked merely mildly surprised. Will had told him they were getting a divorce; they had already discussed it by then, and at some length. Still, he seemed amused that Will was genuinely going to go through with it. When he told Will he’d need to read over the papers before he got back in touch, he said so in the tone he used when indulging Amelie in a play-pretend that had gone on a little too long. It made Will want to hurt him, to strike him, to say something so awful to him that it would make the indulgence fade from his voice.

Will had got the letter three weeks later. It was penned by Hannibal’s lawyer and spanned multiple pages, though the short statement by Hannibal included on page two gave the gist of it. *In his claim for divorce, my spouse states that the marriage has become insupportable due to discord of personalities and that no reasonable expectation of reconciliation exists. As no attempt at reconciliation or compromise have been made on the part of my spouse, I must refute his claim as being premature. I will not accept any settlement on the terms of divorce until I am satisfied that all other measures have been exhausted.*

Will had wondered at first if Hannibal genuinely believed his continued efforts to stall would result somehow in reconciliation. If he thought for a moment Will would simply get bored, or accept he could not run, or be coerced into giving in. Four years on, he wondered no more. Hannibal had in fact lost the initial indulgence, turning combative and cruel in turn, and Will saw that there was no real purpose to the play anymore except to punish Will for what he’d done—and to keep punishing him, and more and again, with no end in sight.

When their hour was up, Will threw his coat on and stumbled out first, eager to escape the stifling atmosphere of the room before he snapped. The air outside was crisp with the autumn's first frost. He had to slow down not to slip on the fine sheen of ice that covered the sidewalk.

Parking was limited, so their cars stood side-by-side. Will flung his door open all the way, hoping it would scratch the Bentley, but he was an inch short.

When Hannibal caught up to him, Will stepped to the side to let him through to the car. Hannibal did not get in.

'We made good time today,' he commented with a glance at his watch. They usually stayed past their hour and were charged something ridiculous for it. 'Coffee?'

'My blood pressure's high enough after that, thanks.'

'I will see you in a couple days, then.'

Will's head whipped up. 'What? We said every other week—'

'Yes, for mediation. I assumed you were going to take Amelie for the weekend after last Friday's disaster.'

Disaster was right, but Will sure hoped Hannibal hadn't been given a play-by-play. He had the awful suspicion that he had—that he knew everything Will didn't want him knowing.

Once, Amelie had been on Will's side. They had rolled their eyes at Hannibal together and conspired to get her out of shopping trips and dinner parties. He recognised it was a shitty thing to want again, but he did want it, desperately: wanted to pretend Hannibal was the outsider, wanted to stop that feeling of always looking in.

Amelie had figured it out, though, as Will should have always known she would. Shopping trips and dinner parties were the stuff of daily life, of the real thing; so were spats over cleaning your plate, over lights out, over whether it was warm enough for bare legs. And when her loyalties had shifted, Will could hardly blame her for it. He would have wanted the real thing, too, if he'd had the option.

'Not this weekend,' he said bitterly. 'She's going to that birthday sleepover. Adela's, I think.'

Something passed through Hannibal's features before he forced them into their usual neutrality. 'I see,' he said.

'What?' Will demanded, then understood. 'She was lying.'

'Adela's birthday is in February.'

'Right.'

Will pushed past him. He needed to get into the car and drive before he did something he would regret.

‘She is punishing you,’ Hannibal observed. ‘I am not going to interfere with that.’

‘I didn’t ask you to interfere.’ The lock stuck. Will shoved at it.

‘Gently,’ Hannibal advised. ‘The car really isn’t separate property either, now I think of it. I recall paying for new tyres. Something to bring up next session, I suppose.’

The door drove into Will’s chest as it jumped open. He dove inside and slammed it shut before he could hear a single comment more.

He called Molly that night. Spontaneity was their thing: they would both tell themselves they had no need of each other anymore, and then something would shift and there was that rush again to pick the bar, to book the hotel, to call the babysitter. Tonight, they ended up in a seedy hostel with a stained mattress and cheap vodka in the minibar. Molly insisted on paying half, always, and medical bills were already running her dry.

For Molly, the way their arrangement worked was about power. If Will paid, Will would have the advantage. If she paid for worse than he could have afforded, and he still came, she had the power. It was stupid in the circumstances, but Will didn’t mind. He was used to the constant struggle for the upper hand, and it seemed it was destined to follow him out of his marriage and into every other aspect of his life.

For Will, the arrangement was about theatre. When he fell into bed with her, he was cast into the role of the villain: the usurper, the infidel, the temptation. He liked to imagine what Molly’s son would think if he found out about Will, how he would hate him, how upset he’d be. He liked to imagine what Molly’s husband would feel if he knew—would he get angry, or would he blame himself? Would it shake his confidence further, would it sour his dying days, or would he find comfort in knowing Molly’s life would go on without him?

Molly’s family was only ever mentioned in passing. She’d apologise for running late and quote a phone call from insurance. She’d complain that a new nurse had made Wally cry. She’d embrace Will, and her clothes would smell of the hospital. She had lived with the smell for three years: Will doubted she noticed it anymore.

Tonight, they shared a bottle of vodka from the minibar, the warmth spreading through their chests driving on their desire, and then had drunken sex atop Will’s coat, which he’d thrown on the bed to protect them from whatever infestation lived in the sheets. Molly laughed that she’d done the same thing once in college, only it had been her own bed that had the bedbugs, and it had been her now-husband she’d wanted enough not to care. He’d brought the bedbugs back to his own dorm after, and everyone hated him for a month.

Then, she started crying. It made Will’s eyes wet and itchy in sympathy, and he had to breathe carefully through his nose and think of his role—the affair, the illicit lover, the adulterer—to stop the tears from flowing.

‘Sorry,’ she said after wiping her face off on a discarded T-shirt. ‘I don’t know what that was about.’

‘Your dying husband,’ Will said. ‘Probably.’

She laughed. ‘It’s like, get a new hobby, am I right? Dying husband this, dying husband that. God, I’m so boring.’

‘You’re not boring. Death is boring.’

‘It is,’ she agreed. ‘I think we’re the only people who know that. The homicide expert and the terminal patient’s wife. No one else is this jaded.’

Will fisted his hand and offered it to her. She bumped it with her own, then grasped it and kissed his knuckles.

‘It was mediation day today, wasn’t it?’ she asked softly. ‘I should mark it out on the calendar —I never remember until after. The sex is always so depressing on mediation day.’

Will pressed a palm to his chest and mimed injury to his heart. ‘Ouch.’

‘You want to talk about it?’

Will shook his head. Then, he said, ‘You know when you’re real tired, or when you’ve been drinking, and you start going through the motions of your life without it ever feeling real? You walk down the stairs, and they don’t feel like real stairs, or—or when you’re a kid and you play house with a friend, and you get really into it until it feels so much more real than the plastic bacon and the dead eyes of the baby doll, but then it’s night-time and your friend goes home?’

She didn’t speak, but he could feel her eyes on his face. He stared resolutely at the ceiling.

‘That’s what the last ten years of my life have been. And I’m coming out the other side now, but I can’t—I keep shaking the doll to see the dead eyes roll back. The lashes flutter—it’s almost like a real child. But the skin is hard and cold.’

Molly sat up. He looked at the line of her bare back. When her husband died, would Molly call on Will, still? Would she try and find a place for him in the grief that followed? Might she introduce Will to her son one day? The idea made him feverish: that he could get another shot at this, a second chance to get it right, one more shot at real. It made him nauseous, too, because he knew that he was only able to want it because of what had happened with Hannibal. That if he did this and became a better husband, a better lover, a better father, it would all be owed to the man who’d ruined his life, and to the lie that he’d made Will live.

‘My husband is dying,’ Molly said without turning around, ‘but I don’t act like he’s already dead. Your husband isn’t dead. Ex-husband—whatever,’ she pre-empted him. ‘I mean, God—neither is your daughter, Will.’

Will let the censure sit in the silence. He didn’t argue. She was right. Hannibal and Amelie were both alive.

The thing Will worried about was that one day soon, he might as well be dead to them.

One winter—must have been seven, maybe eight years ago—Hannibal had thrown a dinner party. It had been a big deal: the first proper dinner party since Amelie was born, the first time the Baltimore house would be full with people, the first time Will would sit on Hannibal's right side when the waiters filed in with the dishes. The preparations had taken up much of the month, and by the time December 24th finally came, Will had started having dreams in which he was shuffling around seating arrangements.

The night of, everything sparkled: the garden lights reflected off the silvery snow outside, the candles cast flickering glows over the luscious reds of cranberry and flowering quince, the wine glistened in gilded chalices. The crinoline on Amelie's dress glimmered with the same hue as the sheen of Hannibal's tie when the light caught it. She would play the perfect accessory, at least for a little while: her hair curled around her ears like a cherub's, and the mismatched tights she'd thrown a crying fit to wear would be hidden well enough by the table.

Will's shirt was a whisper of fabric against skin, new and feeling like it. If he'd looked down, he'd see that his new dress shoes shone from the polish. He would never get used to the money, and not for lack of trying: he had promised himself when moving in that he'd relax about it, that he wouldn't turn up the tension on arguments, that he'd accept this was his life now. It had been several months, and he felt still a deep-seated discomfort at the wealth that surrounded him. For his part, Hannibal never did very much to soothe Will's disquiet; he enjoyed too much the advantage it gave him.

The golden band on Will's ring finger glistened, too. Will smiled when he saw it against the crimson of the serviette. It had been new enough back then that he would still catch himself forgetting the ring, and a wave of disbelieving happiness would crest in him when he saw and remembered, making him woozy.

The first course had been served. Hannibal took a good while to explain in detail what they could see on their plates, and Will listened attentively, though he'd heard it all before. The first bite of the tartare melted in his mouth the moment it felt the heat of the tongue.

In Hannibal's lap, Amelie made a face at the raw meat. Hannibal whispered something in her ear—probably about sticking out one's tongue at the table—and offered her the fig off his plate, which she sucked on happily. Her eyes were wide as she peered at the guests around the table, and Will could see his plan would not come to fruition: he had hoped to give her a half-hour to grow bored and cranky, start fidgeting in her chair and whining, at which point no one could find fault with Will excusing himself to put her to bed.

'She should sit in her own chair,' he told Hannibal, unwilling to give up without a fight. 'No?'

'Ideally,' Hannibal agreed with a courteous smile, though the look in his eyes made it clear that he had seen through Will's scheme. 'But she is quite young. Perhaps next time.'

'*Ne*,' Amelie said from around her fig.

Will shuffled in his chair and leaned toward her. Their faces were so close that he could have stolen a bite of her fig if he'd wanted to.

'You don't want any meat, sugar bug?'

Amelie stuck her tongue out again in response. Hannibal restrained himself from commenting again, though Will saw his shoulders rise in a sigh.

'It's pretty disgusting, huh?' Will continued. 'All of this food is going to be like that, you know. How about you and I go upstairs and just skip straight to dessert? I know where Tėtis put it.'

'No, Daddy,' Amelie said firmly. 'Sit up straight. You're testing me.'

The last bit was picked up by the guests sitting closest. Laughter rang through the room, and soon they were all of them back to cooing at her. She had received the same attention when she'd walked with Hannibal to open the door for each new arrival, and she had basked in it like Will had never imagined she could: blushing and hiding her eyes, yes, but so pleased that giggles pushed past the lip she'd bitten into. She'd even agreed to twirl when asked to show off her dress. Her place at the head of the table now would not help matters. Hannibal must have known and conspired to take advantage.

Two courses in, she finally started to nod off. Her head rested against Hannibal's chest, her mouth open narrowly, and she blinked up slowly as she gazed past Hannibal's chin at the ceiling. The lights and ornaments they'd hung in the thicket of evergreen branches would have blurred into a miasma of colours before her glassy eyes. Will could have watched her watch the colours forever.

Then, Hannibal canted his head down to obscure her line of sight, and when she saw his lopsided face peering down at her, she laughed sleepily, reaching out to make sense of his features with a probing, tiny hand.

Will's heart hurt when he looked at them like this, hating himself for being able only to think: *this is new—this is still so new, between them—will it last? Will she remember that she never used to touch him like this before? Do I want her to remember? Do I want it to last?*

Later, he lay in bed with her. He had kept the suit on to pretend to himself he might still go back down to join the party. Voices and music flowed up from the stairway through the door left ajar. In her dog bed by the wooden model of a castle slept Belle, waking periodically to lick at a knotted bit of fur or the plush rabbit she'd stolen from the laundry basket. Amelie and Will had been counting the puppies on her pyjamas to help her fall asleep, and Will's hand still rested on her side where the count had stopped, the warmth of her sleeping body seeping into his palm.

The wedding ring on his finger was a band of dark now, all spark lost in the dim of the bedroom. He could feel Amelie's breath in the rise and fall of her chest. He came here sometimes at night to check her breathing, to listen to her heartbeat, to make sure she was merely sound asleep and not dead. It was what he'd had to offer, coming into all of this: this

family, this house, their world. What would be left for him to give if this new thing, the smiles and touches and secret conversations, if it lasted?

He must have dozed off, because suddenly there was no music anymore. The house had gone dark. The mattress at his side was dipping.

A hand spread over his neck. Warm breath ghosted over his cheek.

‘Mhhmh,’ Will said into the pillow.

There was a chuckle in his ear, soft and tired. Will snagged him by the fold of his night robe and pulled him fully onto the bed until his body was covering Will’s body, until he was pressed into the mattress by the weight and warmth of him.

‘You can’t sleep in your suit, Will.’

‘I’m not moving.’

‘Come to bed. I’ll take it off you.’

‘I said I’m not moving,’ Will repeated in a whisper. ‘Keep up.’

The collar of his shirt was tugged back. A trail of kisses was laid over his neck. It sent a shiver of heat down Will’s back, but instead of waking him up, it served only to make him warmer, cosier, sweeter.

Amelie fussed in her sleep, shifting under Will’s hand. The bed was a queen size, and even though Amelie preferred to sleep in the very middle of it, there was just enough room for the two of them to nestle together to the side. With a whisper of fabric, Hannibal took off his robe and slid in next to Will. Trapped between the two of them and still dressed in the thick winter suit, Will could hardly move—hardly breathe—and snow was beating against the window, but sleep was like a warm meal on a December night, like the kiss pressed to the nape of his neck, like the steady beat of Amelie’s heart.

‘Will? Are you going to sleep here?’

He blinked up blearily. There was a stain on the ceiling. The lining of the coat he still lay on was sticky with their sweat.

Molly stood by the door, fully dressed for the winter night. Under the cap, her face looked small and strange.

‘Yeah.’ He swallowed. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. ‘Uh, yeah. I think just for a bit. Leave the key?’

When she’d left, he hiked the coat higher up the bed, lay his jacket over the stained pillows, and curled into a tight ball, arms wrapped around his body. The room wasn’t cold—they’d

turned on the electric heater by the wall, and the air smelled staticky from it—but he shivered anyway.

The bed was a queen: he would have plenty of room to toss and turn, with no one there to trap him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone reading - and a double thank you to those leaving kudos and comments!

Next week, a birth, a death, and a big decision!

Eight.

Chapter Summary

> *The boy was helpless, certainly, and Hannibal felt in himself the answering consideration: he knew to soften his hold, he knew to pay attention to supporting the head, he marvelled distantly at the proto-human smell and feel of him, like blood mixed with atopic skin. Beyond that, he did not know.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eight.
Eleven years before the Christmas Eve party.

Amelie was born at five-forty-three in the morning, two days before Christmas, at the John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. The C-section had been scheduled for January 2nd, but Margot woke Hannibal that very night with a pale-white face and shaking hands, and her rabbit heartbeat did much of the work in convincing the attendant surgeon there was no time to waste.

Amelie beat her brother by exactly three minutes and ten seconds, a fact in which she would later take great pride. Hannibal assisted with the washing and the swaddling, and he fed Thomas while the nurse fed Amelie, though at the time they had not been Thomas and Amelie, nor even boy and girl, merely baby first and baby second, indistinguishable in their cries and wrinkled faces.

Margot fell asleep in the hospital bed, worn out but regaining colour, and Hannibal felt ready to follow. The elation of the near-brush with tragedy had kept him alert and happy through the night, but as all such feelings, this too was fading out of him now. Left behind was an emptiness that called for sleep and for a meal. Will would bring food, he told himself, fighting to keep his eyes open. Will would be reproachful at not having been included in the night's rush and ashamed of this reproach, but he would come still and bring everything they needed.

He peered down at the baby in his arms. The hospital bracelet informed him this was the boy. He could see no resemblance to himself or to Margot, only to the sister, and he found he had no further ideas on what else about the infant to explore. The boy was helpless, certainly, and Hannibal felt in himself the answering consideration: he knew to soften his hold, he knew to pay attention to supporting the head, he marvelled distantly at the proto-human smell and feel of him, like blood mixed with atopic skin. Beyond that, he did not know. He hoped Margot's awakening, or Will's arrival, might suggest to him avenues of behaviour to try on, if merely to see how they fit.

Sitting there was how Will found him. He'd hesitated before the door, calming his agitation and quieting his breath, and appeared as haggard as if he'd spent the night awake, his curls flattened unpleasantly from the hat, his eyes lined purple, his hands wringing the old gloves Hannibal had not thought to replace.

'Hi,' he whispered, a quick look cast at the shape Margot drew under the flimsy hospital sheet. Then, his eyes returned to Hannibal and affixed to the baby in his arms. There was such a breadth of feeling in them that Hannibal would need a lifetime to sort through it.

'Would you like to hold him?' Hannibal asked, finding his voice rough from the long night.

Will looked horrified at the idea. He pushed his hands into his pockets. 'No, no. He looks comfortable where he is. I don't—I don't know how to hold babies, anyway.'

'It's not very difficult, Will.'

'No, uh, I was—I was with Dottie earlier. She's not through with deworming. I'm not going to risk it.'

But he did wash his hands, and he came to hunch down by Hannibal and put a finger against the baby's wrinkled wrist. 'I bought the ointment you said,' he whispered. 'His skin is so dry. Is that normal?'

Hannibal was not an expert, but he had a sense of reason. 'Yes,' he said. 'If you don't want to hold him, I'll put him down with his sister.'

Will nodded, though he looked crestfallen. 'I bought a blanket—is it safe to give them a blanket, do you think?'

Hannibal gave them the blanket. There was a small risk of suffocation, certainly, but it made Will brighten when he watched them, and anyway he seemed determined not to lose sight of their mouths, edged open in sleep, of their softly moving chests, of the fisted hands that beat at air as they dreamed.

Margot and the children remained in the hospital for five days. During this time, Hannibal visited frequently, as there was always something to be brought, and after months of co-habitation he had a better idea of Margot's food preferences than the hospital kitchen did. Still, no matter when he chose to drop by, he always found Will already there: sitting at Margot's side, speaking with her in a hushed voice, leaning over the cot, grading papers over his knee.

Hannibal considered feeling dejected but could not hold onto the emotion. He understood Will was indulging in a fantasy with an expiration date, and that the easy smiles that split his lips would make way for bitterness and self-reproach the moment Margot left the hospital, took the children with her and severed the ties of necessity that held her to them. Will had mere days to feed his paternal instinct. The frantic way he fussed with Margot and the children was, if nothing else, fascinating to observe.

Hannibal was simultaneously aware that his own window of opportunity for playing the father was fast closing. He had tended to both children, held Margot's hand when a hormonal fluctuation forced the growing terror of her brother and her offspring's future past the equanimity she normally maintained, and he shopped for diapers and formula. Still, he did not believe he would have felt any different performing these actions for a baby not his own, particularly if the baby were to provoke in Will a similarly entertaining reaction. And beyond these token efforts, what else was there to attempt?

On the day Margot was to be discharged, Hannibal woke early to an alert on his phone.

He generally preferred to keep to a sleep hygiene ritual that involved muting anything non-essential, lest it disturb what was already a thready sleep—he woke early and often, unable to stay dreaming for longer than a few hours at a time—but there were important exceptions to the rule. He blinked quickly to dispel the blurriness and reached for the phone, anticipation building in him.

The header on Tattle Crime's front page read, *Local Meat Magnate Murdered: the Chesapeake Ripper Gives the Pigs their Bacon.*

The photograph, skilfully taken across police tape and the shoulders of FBI officials, showed Mason Verger's severed head propped up against the cushion of an armchair, as though set there to hear a fireside story. The background was too blurry to tell with any certainty the setting of the scene, but from the vaguely industrial look and the lack of ornaments, Hannibal assumed it was a Verger meat production facility.

As he scrolled through the article, the initial surprise crystallised into anger. It wasn't merely that Freddie Lounds, who generally produced insightful if sensationalist pieces, had disappointed Hannibal with her judgement; it seemed as though the FBI itself was eager to attribute the crime to Hannibal, irrespective of how nonsensical such a claim struck. If Hannibal had done this, he would have, perhaps, hung Mason off the edge of the platform and allowed the pigs to start on him while he was awake. If Hannibal had done this, he would have removed any easily removable organs and had Mason sample them for himself before he died. If Hannibal had done this, he would have thought of a more original placement for the severed head, if indeed he had wanted to sever it, and he would have achieved a sense of poetry with whatever he decided. He certainly would not have jumped the man, torn off his head inelegantly with a saw blade meant for softer meat, and thrown the rest of the body into a pen full of ravenous swine.

Mason's enemies numbered more than Hannibal and Margot, so the murder was hardly shocking. Yet the brutality and the mistaken theatrics of the scene suggested to Hannibal that perhaps the perpetrator had copied him on purpose, or at least came to be inspired by him. The former was unacceptable; the latter was pleasing but would inevitably become a nuisance. To add insult to injury, when looking at the photograph of the dead head and absent body Hannibal came to the realisation that this would have, in fact, been the perfect culmination of his efforts to explore parenthood: if he had denied himself the satisfaction of Margot slaughtering her brother to secure her legacy, if he had failed to collect on his part of

the deal, if he had gone and killed Mason, and protected his children forever from falling victim to him.

If he'd had the chance to do what this copycat had done, and to do it better.

His phone alighted again, this time with Margot's name. The FBI would be knocking at the door to the maternity ward already, eager to secure an interview. The only good thing about the affair was that suspicion was unlikely to fall on her. Undue scrutiny, however, was inevitable. Hannibal had been careful to keep Margot off his official patient list, but still things could turn ugly if anyone looked too closely. He sincerely hoped the FBI had better things to do than investigate his practice—

Somewhere to the side of his current train of thought, an earlier train rolled down the tracks, and now previous thoughts were echoing in Hannibal's ears—*the perfect culmination,* and *parenthood,* and *inelegance* and *brutal* and *nuisance* and—

He let the phone ring and ring until the sound died.

Was it possible? Surely not. Will had threatened Mason Verger before, but only in the way any bitter young man with a licence to carry and an unchecked streak of jealousy might be driven to threaten another man: foolishly and without follow-through. Posturing, Mason had called it, and although Hannibal had bristled a little at the mockery, he agreed this was essentially the case.

And yet, now that Hannibal thought about it, Will had threatened other things, too. Or, rather, he had *warned* Hannibal of other things, the threat buried and concealed within each warning. *Don't take pleasure in your success where I have failed, or else I will want to take it from you. Don't come too close right now, or else I will hurt you. Don't let me get too close, or else you will regret it.*

Perhaps Will's desperate drive to serve the tool of justice was not mere ambition and not mere saviour complex. It was both those things, certainly, but here was something else: something tangible that Hannibal through his actions had pushed Will into doing, a deep-seated desire he had made manifest, a capability for a protective cruelty that shone through the amateurish display he had put on.

That Will would have done this was the neatest solution. It was a thrilling surprise. But it was the worst thing for Hannibal to believe, too, because it rearranged the ever-so-carefully arranged pieces of their relationship in a way that put Hannibal distinctly at a disadvantage. He had failed to predict Will in this. He had failed to appreciate just how dangerous Will could be when provoked, and failed again to understand what would provoke him.

What else would he fail to predict, if this should continue?

It had been Hannibal's plan to look at Will and simply know that he'd done it, or else that he had not. But when Will did arrive at the hospital that afternoon, minutes after Jack Crawford

and his agents had filed out, he looked habitually ruffled, twitchy and visibly vexed by the news, and nothing else that would convince Hannibal one way or the other.

Margot's discharge had been pushed back until the evening to allow her time to collect herself, and she sat now straight in her hospital bed, a newspaper spread out in her lap. The featured photograph did not do the story justice. Unlike Tattle Crime, a mainstream news outlet would not publish the picture of a man's severed head, no matter how amusing it looked propped against the cushion of the armchair.

'Tattle Crime have a photograph of the body,' Hannibal told her helpfully, interrupting the stretching silence between the three of them. If no one talked about it, no one would feel better. 'Would you like to see?'

'No,' said Will sharply. He was standing by the window, where the last of the sun came into the room to reveal the cot. He had positioned his body exactly so as to cast shadow over the babies' eyes as they slept.

Margot ignored him and reached for Hannibal's proffered tablet. She scrolled in silence for a minute. Her hands were admirably steady, but a single tear made its way down her cheek. Hannibal would have drawn her right then if he could.

'They're saying it was the Chesapeake Ripper,' she said. 'Was it?'

She was asking Will: the resident expert.

He flinched. He shrugged. What did it mean?

'As far as I know,' said Hannibal, 'the Ripper normally takes trophies from his victims. According to the article, the body was left for the pigs to eat.'

'Freddie Lounds is questionably clever,' Will spat, 'but she's not FBI. They'll still be recovering body parts from the pigs. It's entirely possible they won't be able to account for everything. Whatever he took, we might never know.'

'So it was the Ripper?' Margot asked again. Hannibal understood why she needed the reassurance: if it had been the Ripper, it had not been Hannibal. The idea that she might suspect him, however distantly, of murdering a man in such a fashion, warmed him on the one hand—it felt good to be seen for who he was, even in snatches—but offended him, too, because he had not done it, and if he'd done it, he would have done it so very differently.

If it had been Will, had he been careful about fingerprints and stray hairs? He knew about forensics, surely, but knowing a thing in theory was not the same as knowing a thing in practice. Hannibal could have instructed him if he'd been consulted.

Only no—he could not have, for the same reason he could not confront Will now and demand the truth once and for all. For how could he reveal what he suspected of Will, without revealing something of *himself*?

‘I’ve done research enough into the Ripper to occasionally lecture on him,’ Will was saying. ‘I haven’t worked his cases. I’m not the authority here, Jack Crawford and his team are.’

‘I asked Jack Crawford, and he told me nothing. I’m asking you now. My brother is dead, Will.’

Hannibal watched Will’s throat as he swallowed. His eyes were dark. Whatever was going on inside his head, Hannibal was ignorant to, and this made him burn ever brighter inside, ever hotter still, the feeling so urgent he had to curl his toes in his shoes against it.

‘Jack Crawford thinks it’s the Ripper,’ Will answered, still evasive. ‘It’s a sound theory. The theatrics are exactly what you’d expect from the Ripper. The choice of victim, too: he targets people who offend him, and Mason was a pig. So, he fed him to the pigs.’

‘A symbolic act of cannibalism,’ Hannibal remarked. ‘But that is not all the Ripper did. He had him watch.’

‘Part of the picture,’ Will explained. He was looking through the window, tense and half-absent. ‘Mason was fascinated by the perversities of human nature. By how humans could be shaped and influenced to act in ways seemingly in contrast to their nature. How, maybe, it’s only in the perversion that true nature can manifest. He got to try that one out for himself. Courtesy of the Ripper.’

‘Or perhaps it was simple cruelty,’ Hannibal countered gently. ‘And his art was his excuse.’

Will turned sharply, gaze searing into Hannibal. And it was then, with their eyes meeting across the room and the naked fear that Hannibal saw in Will’s face, that Hannibal knew.

‘Whatever it was,’ Will spoke tightly, stomping down on the feeling, ‘Mason’s dead. That’s all that matters. And I’m getting coffee.’

Then, he left—then, he ran. Did he know he’d been caught?

Once the door had shut behind him, Margot let out a breath.

‘Is he alright?’ she asked. ‘He doesn’t seem alright.’

Hannibal chuckled, feeling breathless. ‘Will takes everything much too seriously. He enjoys making life harder than it needs to be.’

Margot leaned back against the pillow. In the twins’ cot, the girl began to fuss. The sun was in her eyes.

‘Your brother is dead,’ Hannibal noted conversationally. ‘How does that make you feel?’

‘Glad,’ Margot said. ‘Relieved. Disappointed.’

‘Disappointed that he died by another’s hand?’

She laughed. ‘No, Doctor. That part is disappointing to you, I’m sure, but not to me. No, I feel—I feel disappointed that I don’t feel happy. I wanted to feel happy when it happened. But I don’t feel sad, either.’

‘The feeling might come with time.’

‘The happiness? Or grief?’

‘Both, I imagine.’ They shared a smile. ‘And I am not disappointed.’

Scepticism flashed across her face. ‘You wanted me to kill my brother. You wanted it enough to offer to do this for me—all of this. And I am not so naïve to think it was the only reason, either—but in any case, I failed to deliver on my part of the deal. Didn’t I?’

Hannibal looked at the door, imaging the shape of Will there. He had already got so much more out of the deal than he had ever dreamed. And yet, there was more to play for. He could not let Will go now; he could hardly afford to lose sight of him. Hannibal saw plainly how dangerous such a thing would be—how he had played with fire on those occasions he had flirted with breaking up with Will or keeping Will at arm’s length—he saw this so plainly, now that he was beginning to understand what Will was capable of.

‘I might request something else in return,’ he told Margot. ‘If you’re amenable.’

Initially, no one was amenable, least of all the little girl.

She cried primarily for the usual reasons a newborn cried: out of discomfort from a soiled diaper, out of sleepiness or the assaulting brightness of waking, out of hunger and out of fear that her hunger would last forever. And yet, Hannibal imagined it wasn’t merely the terror of a hostile world that pushed her to exercise her young lungs with wailing screams, but also the sense that a turn in the tide of fate had torn her from one life and was carrying her fast into another. The very foundations she had been born into—her mother, her twin, her house and its legacy—were now gone, and instead there were the new spaces of Hannibal’s dark home, the new scents of herbs and wine, the new legacy that escaped so far even Hannibal’s understanding. What would he bestow upon her to distinguish her from her brother, and from all other children alike?

He considered speaking to her in French. He had even chosen the name *Amelie* to bring her closer to the culture of a country which had given him his youth. She would be a polyglot, he decided, a citizen in spirit of nations she had not seen, and if she did, she would find did not exist as they were in her mind. She would grow up in wealth that announced itself obvious when contrasted with the lives of her peers, yet which blanched when compared to the wealth of her brother. She would receive a classical education that she would grow to either treasure or scorn; she would spend her childhood separate from her closest kin, evolving in ways alien to them, until, when she reached a more complete age, she would pose through her very being another argument in that age-old debate: nature or nurture? How alike her brother would she grow to be, if they lived separate lives of separate worlds?

This secondary aim for the experiment—the primary being, naturally, to make use of the lunatic protectiveness which had risen in Will, and to secure himself a hostage should he need one in a future confrontation—seemed clear to Hannibal. The steps through which to accomplish it, however, quickly muddled.

Margot was the first issue. While there was a relief in her when she relinquished the responsibility for the girl and took on the easier task, in her mind, of raising the boy, she was as reluctant to let go as Hannibal had feared. She would call often with offers to lend him her nanny, to purchase a drug that had worked well for Thomas, to mind the two children together for an excuse to dress them in the same clothing. With time, the phone calls came more rarely and lost their urgency, but still they came, and faced with her determination to maintain familial ties Hannibal found he could not refuse. She had given him a great deal; it would be rude to appear ungrateful.

Will liked the idea of Amelie perhaps least of all, which was the second issue. He was suspicious of Hannibal's change of heart and suspicious of Margot's assent. He was suspicious, first and foremost, of himself and his place in the new arrangement, especially now that he had committed his crime, and as a result he grew distant in those first few weeks, restricting his presence in Hannibal's life to occasional texts with updates about Dottie, the four-legged surrogate child he'd become obsessed with, and requests for Hannibal to relay shopping lists and vaccination schedules. Hannibal never told him that he could have just as easily paid someone to deliver groceries, nor did he blister at the implication that he could not be trusted to keep his daughter's doctor's appointments without a reminder. Will was a strict man, he had grown to understand, with high expectations for others but most of all for himself; if he failed to meet them, as he often did, he grew sterner and more exacting still, until there would be no escaping the weight of his guilt and self-recrimination. That Will was wary of Hannibal and his daughter made Hannibal pleased: it secured them a place at the heart of Will's world, which was a thing made up of fear and wariness first.

The aspiration of introducing Amelie to French presented as much of a challenge as encouraging Will's commitment. While Hannibal found it tiresome but generally satisfying to care for her simple needs of hunger, comfort and warmth, he struggled to think of a thing to say to her. When he tried to speak while changing or feeding her, he felt much the same as if he had started making conversation at a shoe he was polishing or a vase he was dusting. The shoe, the vase and the baby were all three of them beautiful and deserving of care and attention, yet they were objects still, governed by simple rules and incapable of greater comprehension. And so, Hannibal worked in silence, the words stuck in his throat.

The day after the Lunar New Year, Will came with groceries and, for the first time since Amelie had come to live with Hannibal, he lingered. The smell of alcohol clung to him: he'd have spent the night in Wolf Trap as usual, shushing the dog and drinking to quieten the voices in his mind.

Without asking, Hannibal planted Amelie in Will's arms and busied himself with unpacking the bags, allowing him the time to fight past embarrassment.

He wondered if Will would bring up the topic of Mason Verger, in the hope perhaps of gauging how much Hannibal suspected. Hannibal had long decided he would reveal nothing. While exposing the conflict in Will would be entertaining, it risked exposing Hannibal, too. Allowing Will to wallow in anxiety, however, could only work to Hannibal's benefit.

'She's grown,' Will commented finally. 'Even since last week.'

'Yes.'

'She looks—she's looking more and more human, doesn't she? Her eyes are still wandering, though.'

'A few more weeks of that, I believe.'

'Yeah—she's listening, though. You're listening, aren't you?' His voice turned soft when he spoke to her, mouth close against her cheek. 'Hey. Hey, Amelie. Did you see the fireworks in the harbour last night?'

'We did,' Hannibal answered for her. 'Amelie's bedroom has a good view. We were awake much of the night. She's not a good sleeper.'

'You're not? Just like your daddy. He's a horrible sleeper, you know. It's his fault, probably, that you are as well. What do you think: should your daddy take some of that money he's been spending on fancy onesies, and get someone to watch you for a few hours? And take a nap before he keels over?'

Amelie sneezed, and Will laughed.

'She says yes,' he translated.

'That will not happen.' Hannibal set the last of the products into the fridge. He wanted to face Will but found himself hesitating. There was a thorn in his chest that had the shape of Will's absence: of Will having abandoned him to do this on his own. 'I might sleep if you watched her. But you knew that.'

Will sighed. 'I have to be careful, Hannibal,' he said, so softly Hannibal barely heard him. 'I have to be so, so careful. Don't you see?'

'I see. But being careful is not in your nature, Will.'

Will scoffed. 'If you think that, then you really don't know me.'

'I know you.' Hannibal met his eyes. 'You are always careful, but it does not satisfy you. What was it that you said? That true nature can only manifest in the perversion?'

Will hid his face by planting a kiss on Amelie's head. He did not answer.

'Stay for dinner,' Hannibal said.

'Dinner's hours away. I can't—'

‘It wasn’t a request.’

Will peered up at him. A thrill went through Hannibal at that look. With the demands of Amelie’s care, he had not had the time or the energy to satisfy the appetite which the brightness of Will’s eyes was now stirring in him; and it had been so long since he had touched Will. There had been some touching, in those final months of Margot’s pregnancy, Will’s presence growing too heady and insistent for Hannibal to have ignored; there had never been enough.

‘Your daddy’s playing dirty,’ Will informed Amelie. ‘He’s dangling bait, see. And if I stay, he’ll decide that after all I haven’t earned it.’

It struck Hannibal ridiculous, then, perverse, even, that he had denied himself for so long. He had been amusing himself with a fantasy lately of Will straddling Mason Verger, saw blade pressed into his bulging neck, doing an awful job of it. In the fantasy, Hannibal stood and watched from above, and chastised Will for his inexperience and his impatience until Will’s face was red from shame, and until he leapt at him in turn, turning on him—and in self-defence, Hannibal would kill him eventually, though he never managed to get to that part. The details of everything which came before were too delicious to be rushed.

Will stayed for dinner that day, and he stayed the night. He fed Amelie, he changed Amelie and washed Amelie, and he spoke to her throughout, which Hannibal knew was good for her brain. Hannibal listened, too, and enjoyed it.

When Amelie slept, Will spent some time instructing his neighbour on dog-care over the phone, then came to Hannibal’s bed for the first time in nearly six weeks. Sleepiness weighed down Hannibal’s limbs and sanded his eyes, but he pushed through it until the exhaustion no longer interrupted his eagerness, only fuelled it. He bruised Will until his own strength failed him, he kissed Will until his own lips trembled from the strain, he came on Will until his knees gave out.

‘If you fall asleep before you make me come,’ Will said in his ear, ‘I’m going to dump you.’

‘You’ve already come.’

‘Again.’

Hannibal hefted himself up. His eyes would not open anymore. At the time, he did not yet know Will’s body blind as he would years on, and the trail his mouth traversed down Will’s chest and belly was a journey of discovery, every divot, shift of muscle and speck of mole a surprise treat to kiss and suck on.

When Will came in his mouth, Hannibal lay his head against his thigh and dozed a while, trying to regain enough energy to go and wash up. Will’s fingers stroked through his hair. Hannibal could hear the slowing pulse of his heart as blood rushed through the femoral artery.

‘I could spend the night sometimes,’ Will said. ‘I could go to Amelie when she cries.’

It was what Hannibal had hoped for, but even through the drowsiness he could sense there was more in what Will was saying than he'd made plain. He lifted his head and rested his chin against Will's stomach to catch a glimpse of his expression.

'Do you believe I am neglecting my daughter, Will?' he asked. He was offended, but more than that he was curious. What might have suggested such a thing to Will? Had he understood something of Hannibal's disaffect, or was he seeking an excuse to insert himself into the role of the better father, and so gain advantage?

Will didn't answer immediately. He seemed to weigh his words, to search through his myriad impressions until he touched upon the truth of his intent.

'No,' he said finally. 'I don't think you'd neglect her. I don't think she's in any danger. But I do think that—I think that maybe, sometimes, she might cry, and you might let it go on longer than I would. Because it doesn't touch you. Does it?'

Hannibal said nothing. Will already knew the answer.

'I don't want to make you feel inadequate,' he continued firmly, even though it was obvious he wished for Hannibal to feel exactly that. 'It's not as if it's even uncommon. Some parents feel it from day one and some don't. There's nothing wrong with that, as long as you're doing right by her. And you are. I know.'

'We convince ourselves that infants need our love, but in reality, they need only certain manifestations of it,' said Hannibal. 'I am capable of providing those manifestations.'

'I know. And maybe I'm naïve for thinking there's a difference that she can feel. But there is a difference—or there will be, eventually. I have to believe that.'

Hannibal believed it, too. But he didn't *feel* the difference—not then.

Chapter End Notes

If you come into the comments saying Hannibal is baby-trapping Will, let me tell you right now you are right but also wrong. He is mostly baby-trapping himself.

Next week, sleepover at the Lecters. Some children may emerge mildly traumatised.

Five weeks before the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

> *A powerful sense came over Amelie that she was watching something she was not privy to, and this perturbed her more than she knew how to express; and not because she was jealous of Tommy or of the permissiveness Tėtis showed with him, but because her father could think thoughts which had nothing to do with her, and which she would never know.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nine.
Five weeks before the Christmas Eve party.

Tommy would not be throwing a birthday party this year. This was because he didn't have any friends except Joseph, who was just as socially incompetent. Amelie could not see why the two of them couldn't put in a little more effort to win the friendship of at least two other boys, at which point a party could certainly be thrown. Still, she wasn't going to tell Tommy how to live his life—she had already tried, and he had bit her.

Tommy would not be accepting gifts, either. This was because he had discovered environmentalism. Amelie wanted both a party and presents for her own birthday—which she would celebrate several weeks after he celebrated his, having effectively bullied him into moving the date early so as not to be forced to share the spotlight—and she felt Tommy was decidedly showing her up by insisting on things like waste reduction and charity donations. It also left her with the bigger issue of what to even *do* with him on his birthday.

Eventually, she and Tėtis chanced upon an idea: Tėtis had met a man at some party or other who ran the National Museum of Dentistry, and he offered to let them in after hours. Tommy's eyes lit up when Amelie asked what he thought about it. He loved all things teeth.

To Amelie, the museum was barely worth a visit on a regular day, never mind a birthday. There had been one pleasing moment when Tėtis's friend led them to a human-sized 3D model of a jaw and gave them a humongous toothbrush that could be used to clean the plastic teeth; the toothbrush was the length of Amelie's arm and very good for combat. Tommy had received a shattering blow to the elbow and a smattering of bristles in his face before he'd had the chance to wrestle the weapon away from her, and by that time Tėtis had turned back around, so he couldn't retaliate.

Beyond this, there was little to look at and too much to read. Tommy had brought Joseph along, who was big on animals, and they read every plaque by every fossil religiously, lifting on their tiptoes side-by-side and looking genuinely fascinated. Amelie mostly let them be.

She got antsy quickly in museums if no one was paying attention to her, and most museums at least had art to look at, which was surely more interesting than bits of bone.

The one display she lingered by showed a collection of dentures from various cultures. They had old-fashioned wiry braces, Etruscan golden teeth bridges that would be worn by wealthy women, and there were false teeth made from seashells, and ivory, and bits of bone.

'Which ones do you like?'

Tėtis had come to stand beside her. With a glimpse to the right, Amelie saw that his friend had walked on. He was now explaining something to Tommy in a hushed voice.

The museum was closed to visitors, so there was no real reason to keep your voice low, but Amelie, too, felt compelled by the dimmed lights and the echoing quiet. In lieu of a verbal answer she merely pointed to the black porcelain dentures from Japan, decorated in golden patterns.

'Beautiful,' Tėtis agreed.

'I would wear this over my missing teeth when I'm old,' Amelie whispered. 'And my grandchildren would all be orphans, and they'd come to live with me, and they'd have nightmares about my black smile. And I'd have a black mourning veil that I'd wear all the time. The long lacy one we saw at the Walters.'

This was what Amelie liked best about art, and what made art better than bones: art could be *lived in*. Amelie knew she would never meet Matisse's dancers, but she could easily imagine taking part in a blood ritual than involved a circle of naked bodies and twisted forms; she would never live in rooms painted and sculpted like a baroque cathedral but could wonder about what sort of person she'd be if she did. Visits to museums and galleries had always seemed to Amelie not dissimilar to shopping trips, only she was shopping for alternate versions of herself, living a thousand lives in a thousand mirror worlds.

'Philosophers and critics often attempt to separate the value of a piece of art from its functionality,' said Tėtis. 'Is the denture beautiful to you because it is beautiful, or because it would be beautiful to wear?'

Amelie thought about it. 'Because it would be beautiful to wear.'

'Then you see art primarily as functional. You can admire a painting, but only because it shows things you would enjoy having in your life, or because it would suit an imagined room.'

'Things are better if they're useful,' said Amelie. When she looked up at Tėtis, she saw him smile.

'But if we had only useful things in life,' he said, 'what sort of life would it be?'

She couldn't think of a comeback, so she asked him to fix her braid, which had grown loose in the struggle with Tommy. He hunched by her side to do so, and she waited until his mouth

was full of pins before saying,

‘A braid is beautiful *and* useful. See?’

Because of the pins he couldn’t answer, and that meant Amelie had had the last word.

Dinner was served at their house. Amelie had insisted on crowning the event with a sleepover in a final attempt to make the birthday celebration feel at all celebratory. There was pig roast gleaming burnt sugar and a potato gratin that oozed butter. The coniferous arrangement at the centre of the table boasted red pearls of fruit and white pearls of something else.

‘Are those teeth?’ Joseph whispered to Tommy.

‘They are,’ Tėtis said. ‘Pig teeth, for the most part. They are remarkably human in appearance, aren’t they?’

‘Are any of them actually human?’ Tommy asked, picking up on the wording.

‘Yes. It is not at all difficult to obtain human teeth online. I did wonder if you’d be able to tell them apart.’

Tommy pulled himself up to kneel on his chair and lean over the table, inspecting the arrangement. He gently pried at one tooth with a finger, as though by touch he might be able to determine something about it that escaped the eye.

‘You’re putting your elbow in my food,’ Amelie complained, kicking at Tommy’s chair. ‘Sit down properly. Some people are trying to have dinner.’

‘I’m finished eating anyway,’ said Tommy without looking back at her. This was blatantly untrue: there was a sizable piece of meat still on his plate. ‘I decided I should be vegetarian, so I’m vegetarian now,’ he clarified.

‘No, you aren’t *vegetarian*,’ said Amelie with spite. ‘We had chicken two weeks ago.’

‘I said *now*. Were you listening?’

Amelie looked at Tėtis, hoping he would say something. He did not even meet her eye. Instead, he was studying Tommy with attention, as though his newly announced vegetarianism and his small finger palming at a particularly large canine were both things worthy of study. A powerful sense came over Amelie that she was watching something she was not privy to, and this perturbed her more than she knew how to express; and not because she was jealous of Tommy or of the permissiveness Tėtis showed with him, but because her father could think thoughts which had nothing to do with her, and which she would never know.

Once dinner plates had been put away and birthday candles had been blown, once cake had been had, games played, and Amelie’s bathroom steamed up silver, the three of them, sans Tėtis, sat themselves cross-legged on her bed, a stolen candle nestled in the covers between

them. It was late, the hand of the clock in the upstairs hall edging ever the closer to midnight, and Amelie had turned off the lights to feign they had gone obediently to sleep.

The flame of the candle cast ghost shapes over their faces and the light fabric of their pyjamas. Tommy told a story about the ghost of his uncle who haunted the slaughterhouse looking for his missing head. Joseph was too shy to be a good storyteller and made out as if he knew no ghost stories. Quickly enough Amelie's turn came, who as host felt it was her duty to frighten properly. She considered making up a ghost for one of the murders she had read about on *Tattle Crime,* but Will had ruined this for her, too, by sheer power of association. She bit her lip as she thought, ignoring Tommy's impatient jabs, and then found an unexpected saviour in Joseph, who proclaimed out of nowhere,

'I think your house is haunted.'

This would be fantastic news for Amelie. She fixed him with a look, urging him to say more.

He lowered his head at the insistence and murmured, 'Probably there are spirits here, I think. Looking for their teeth.'

'Hannibal bought the teeth online,' Tommy scoffed. 'What, did the ghost come in with the delivery? Don't be stupid.'

'This place is creepy,' Joseph insisted. 'I can feel this sort of thing. My grandma is basically a medium.'

'No, she's not.'

'And your dad is scary. I mean, he's nice, but he's scary.'

Tommy's mocking smile made it very clear what he thought of the idea. Amelie tended to agree—if buying human teeth online and arranging them lovingly into a table centrepiece was sign of anything, it was sign of Tėtis wanting to amuse himself by shocking them, and also of Tėtis having too much free time—but Joseph believing otherwise counted in Amelie's favour.

She nodded, then leaned in and softened her voice until it could be barely heard over the crackle of the candle. 'I don't think he ordered them online.'

'Right. Don't listen to her. Any time she talks, it's usually a lie.'

'I think we should let Joseph decide what's the lie,' Amelie shot back, then addressed Joseph again. 'You know he used to be a surgeon? And when you're a surgeon, sometimes people die while you're operating on them. They take them to the morgue and open them up again to find out exactly how they died. And then, they take them to be buried. But sometimes, the family have no money for a funeral, or they don't want anything to do with their dead, or sometimes there's no family at all. And the body has nowhere to go.'

She took Joseph by the hand, resting the pads of her fingers gently on his wrist. He watched with fascination as she mimed the gentle footsteps of the lost body, turning left and right and

going back in circles, with nowhere to go and no escape to find.

‘And in his study, my father has a secret door behind the bookcase,’ she continued. ‘I don’t know what goes on behind it. All I know is that sometimes, I can hear the hinges screech open at night—it sounds nothing like any other door in the house, and I lie awake, waiting for hours, waiting for it to close again. And the next day, there’s always something new on the table at dinner. A thigh bone that he says came from a deer, but it’s too small for a deer. A fractured skull, open at the top, and blood-red grapes spill from inside. And guess what I heard last night.’

Though Joseph knew the answer, he only stared with bated breath, his grey eyes widening as from Amelie’s throat came the high, crackling imitation of an unoiled hinge screeching open.

The clock in the hall struck midnight.

Joseph clutched Amelie’s hand. She could feel the pulse of his blood in her fingers.

‘You’ve never tried seeing what’s in that room?’

‘I’m not allowed to. But maybe we could… if one of us stands guard, we could go together.’

Joseph was shaking his head, though Amelie knew he was only playing his role. Apprehensive excitement showed through his blanched face.

‘There’s no secret door,’ Tommy said weakly. ‘I’m not afraid to go and prove you’re a liar, anyway.’

‘Fine. Then let’s go. But we have to be careful. If he found us poking about his study—’

She let her voice hang on the unvoiced threat, allowing their imaginations to run wild as they filled in the gap. Then, she took up the candle and led them out toward the stairway.

Their feet brushed each step before settling down, every creak accompanied by a wince and followed by shushing. The upstairs had been fully black, curtains drawn for the night and doors pulled shut, but below there was the faint glow from the kitchen, where Tėtis would have been cleaning up or preparing tomorrow’s meal. The cool light fell over the bottom stairs, and when she got to them, Amelie had to fight the instinct to close her eyes in a childish attempt to hide herself from view. She held back breath and did not release it again until they made it to the study, whose heavy door protected them well enough from discovery so long as it was pulled shut behind them.

All three of them understood, Amelie knew, that there had never really been a secret door, and that the danger they were in was manufactured. After they had searched the study, Amelie thought they might wait out until Tėtis had gone upstairs to wash, and sneak past the kitchen and out to the back garden, where the grass would be glazed with fresh frost and the panes of the tiny glasshouse coloured with the ghost of the night’s breath. They would stand close together inside, forced into proximity by the tight space and the shiver of their bodies, and Amelie would show them her snails, which Tommy had seen before, but Joseph hadn’t

yet. This would make up very well for the lack of a secret passageway, she expected, and calm them down enough to then proceed eventually to bed.

But a danger imagined in the hush and dark of night felt more real than it had any right to, and while Amelie helped the boys feel at the spine of each tome in turn, searching for the one that would spark the secret door's mechanism to life, she felt her heart beat wildly in her chest, rabbit-fast and awfully exciting. Realistically, she knew that if Tėtis decided to come into the study and find them, nothing would happen whatsoever except that perhaps Amelie would be given a candle-holder and warned against singed thumbs. The quiet knowledge did nothing to slow her heart, and Joseph's and Tommy's anxiety fed her own in turn, until she was ready to burst from it.

'Look.' Tommy was beckoning her over. He had taken a sketchbook off a shelf and had it laid open in his arms, trying to make out the shapes in the lazy light of the crescent moon in the window. 'Is that Will?'

She shone the flickering light of the candle over the paper, careful to avoid dripping the hot wax over it. A drop struck her bare forearm and sizzled there with a hot sting before settling.

She had seen many of Tėtis's drawings before. He usually copied fragments of paintings and sculptures or drew intricate landscapes of buildings and cities they had visited together. Sometimes, he let Amelie take one when he was finished with it and add her own colours, filling in the pencil outline with beeswax or charcoal crayon. She would add her signature next to his in the corner, and she would put her favourites in among her own sketches, collected haphazardly across books and folders.

The picture she saw now was different. The man in it was undeniably Will, though she understood Tommy's initial wariness. In place of Will's mouth was an open wound oozing black blood. His eyes were shut delicately, the lashes lengthened in the profile, each like a spider leg reaching across the white of cheek. In his hand was what she suspected had been meant a fishhook, because it was attached to a line, but what resembled in heft more an instrument for hanging up pigs.

Saying nothing, Amelie turned the page. Another drawing was revealed, this time of a man strung up like a fattened pig ready for slaughter.

'What's that?' Joseph asked.

'Nothing,' said Tommy, turning them away to hide the sketchbook in shadow. 'Keep looking for the door.'

They leafed through the pages together. The drawings themselves, though rendered more horrible by the night and their fantasy adventure, did not bother Amelie because they were gruesome; anyway, they were not all so. Some were of buildings and art again, of Greek bodies and sprawling skylines, but they had all one thing in common, and this thing struck Amelie as more terrifying than ghosts or teeth or dead meat: they showed places Amelie had never been, artworks Amelie had never seen, moments and impressions which had taken place in a life Amelie had not lived.

She knew, of course, that her father had lived for many years before she'd been born, and that even now he went out alone, met with people she didn't know, read books she never opened. He did not speak of this life, though, that stood separate from Amelie's, and certainly he never spoke of his life from before Amelie; all she knew about it came from mentions made by others, or references Tėtis had made in conversation with someone else.

Tommy turned the page again, and there was Amelie.

At least, it had surely been *meant* to have been Amelie: her nose and the unfinished eyes, the irises left white and dead, were depicted with the attention to detail characteristic of Tėtis, and the shape of her brow and the curve of the mouth left little room for doubt. But so many things were wrong, too: her hair was shorter than she had worn it since she was little, and it lacked its delicate wave. The ears stuck out at the sides in a way which Amelie's had never done, and the chin was rounder and softer than her own, the whole face made to appear younger through it. It gave such an impression of the uncanny that Amelie felt sick just looking at it: it was her and not-her, familiar and alien.

So focused was she on the horror of the face that she would have missed the rest of the picture if Tommy had not pointed it out to her. The not-Amelie's neck was covered in deep gashes, some showing bone and revealing the pulse of the artery, and where the arms tapered down to hands, clasped around a doll Amelie did not recognise, they were missing fingers, bone stumps sticking out of dying skin as though they'd been bitten off by something with teeth too large to be human.

Amelie thought about the press of Tommy's teeth when he'd bitten her last, insistent against soft skin, and how they showed sharp and large when he smiled. They were so alike Tėtis's in shape that she could not help but think of that next, of Tėtis's teeth settling gently on her shoulder when they'd played wolves and rabbits.

A light came on in the corridor, shining through the gap under the door.

'Hide,' she said. The flame of the candle danced frantically as her hand shook. She blew it out. 'Quick!'

Tommy and Joseph rushed to hunch behind the sofa, where they'd be out of sight of the doorway but little else. Before Amelie followed, she tore off the page with the drawing, folded it into the pocket of her nightgown, and stuffed the sketchbook back onto the shelf.

The door clicked open. They pressed themselves flat to the floor, counting on the shadows to conceal their shape.

Soft footsteps made their way into the room. By the desk, they halted. Amelie could see, in the sliver revealed from behind the sofa's edge, the soles of his shoes. They turned, pointing toward her.

No one moved or breathed. In the silence, Amelie could hear her own heartbeat.

Could he hear it, too? Or—could he smell the lingering scent of the blown-out candle, like Amelie could?

A moment later, the feet moved again. From the sound of it, a book was taken off a shelf, and a glass picked up from the desk. If he was taking the glass, he would return it to the kitchen before going upstairs, thought Amelie feverishly.

The footsteps receded. The door clicked shut again. Amelie counted to five.

‘Go,’ she whispered. ‘He’s in the kitchen. Run upstairs now.’

They tried to be quiet, but in the rush it was impossible. The wooden floor sang. The stairs screamed. Behind them, a shadow had cast itself in the light from the kitchen, too long and too dark to be that of a man.

They threw themselves into Amelie’s bedroom and scrambled into bed, diving under covers until not even their heads were exposed. Their breaths, fast and shallow, comingled in the stuffy pocket of warmth beneath the duvet. It smelled of fear here, and of the terror of anticipation.

A light came on in the upstairs hallway. The footsteps they’d so dreaded sounded louder against the floor, drawing near. The bedroom door edged open, and they all played dead, as though they were prey and a hunter’s eye were on them.

Once the bedroom door had closed again and the sound of the shower in the master bath came on, Joseph and Tommy erupted into giggles. Amelie tried to join in, but her heart wasn’t in it. She had no illusions that Tėtis had been taken in by the sleeping act, or indeed by their poor hiding place in the study. He could not have known Amelie had found the drawing, though, that sat now heavily against her chest.

For hours, she could not sleep. She’d pressed in close to Tommy, whose whistling breath tickled at her scalp, and whose arm had nestled around her without prompting. She thought without hope that maybe she could untangle herself and patter down the dark hallway to Tėtis’s bedroom, where she’d climb into his bed and find him not the dark shadow who’d pursued them nor the ominous phantom of Joseph’s fantasies, but merely the same as he’d always been, warm to the touch and content to take her cool feet in his hands and massage them back into life.

But *had* he always been the same? There was a distant sense in Amelie that this was not true, that she was forgetting something important, born perhaps of looking at the not-picture of herself in which she bore the features of two different girls.

If he hadn’t interrupted, would she have found among the drawings a portrait of Tėtis, too, with a face that was the face of two fathers: one she knew, and one she had forgotten?

Chapter End Notes

Imagine your child comes home from a sleepover to tell you he was playing "guess which tooth is human" over dinner.

Thank you to everyone reading. You might have noticed the chapter count went up some from the original. Because of this, and because I'll be travelling soon, I'm going to be taking a two-week break from posting. The next chapter is ready, so it's definitely coming - but I'd like to give myself a bit of extra time to get caught up with writing the later chapters.

In the meantime, come check out my tumblr - later today, I'll be posting some extra pictures for reference in case you'd ever want to do a Baltimore / Washington *No Reasonable Prospect*-themed tour.

Four weeks before the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ten.
Four weeks before the Christmas Eve party.

Garett Jacob Hobbs was the second man Will had killed.

It got easier, killing, Will remembered thinking back then, half-choked with hysterical laughter, sitting across from Garett Jacob Hobbs' daughter in the back of the ambulance. He'd been able to think things like this, to feel concerned about the bleeding girl and her mother, to think of scratching an itch where the blood staining his face had put it. When he'd killed his first, the spike of elation had quickly made room for sickening panic, no thoughts in his head except *you've done it now—you've done it—you've done it—*

Today, Garett Jacob Hobbs' daughter was sitting across the table from Will, alive and whole, stirring her coffee. The cinnamon sprinkled overtop the foam clung to the teaspoon, leaving behind an unpleasant, brown stickiness. She made to lick it off before remembering she'd wanted to come across professional.

Will tried to guess whether things had ever got easier for her, too. If the second, the third, the fourth girl she had helped her father take had been easier than the first. She hadn't specified as much in the essay he'd just finished reading, of course, or even in the ludicrous exposé on victimhood she and Freddie Lounds had finally published last summer. Will rather thought it would have been an interesting insight, but then he'd sent Lounds' calls to voicemail when she'd tried to get his side of the story, so he'd never got the chance to suggest it.

'It's good,' Will said, tapping the essay at his elbow. 'But you're shrinking back from talking about exactly the thing you should be talking about. They'll already know who you are. They've probably all read a whole book about who you are. You need to use that. Otherwise, it just seems like you have things to hide.'

'I do have things to hide. Everyone has things to hide.'

'So be transparent. Best way of hiding there is.'

Abigail nodded pensively. She took a pen, slid the essay from under his elbow, and bent her head to make a note. Her hair fell curtain-like, obscuring her face but revealing the faded scar on her neck.

'How's your mother?'

'She's fine. She doesn't know I'm meeting you. But she does know about the FBI now. We're back to Jack Crawford as the bogeyman, and now I'm supposed to go get a graduate degree in management or something, or else he'll come back and ruin my life.'

Three months after Garret Jacob Hobbs' death, Abigail's mother had sent Will a gift basket. Hannibal had decreed the wine a cooking wine at best, and Amelie had eaten the chocolate casing off liqueur chocolate after liqueur chocolate until she was sick. With the gift basket had been included a card, informing Will in no uncertain words that he had played his part in Abigail's life by saving it, and that he was now to stay well away.

Whether Louise remained unaware of the tether that held tight between Will and Abigail, or whether she could feel its pull on her daughter, and it was precisely that which had motivated her hatred for him, Will did not know. But there was a connection there that a mother's concern could not touch, just as Will imagined there would have been one between Abigail and her father, something so different and strange to Louise that she'd always be confined to watching from the sidelines.

'Jack Crawford likes you,' Will said.

'What, he no longer thinks I helped my father kill and cannibalise eight girls?'

'No. He can believe what he believes and still like you. And if he thinks there's something in you that would allow you to do that, then he thinks you might know how to spot it in others, and that it'll be good to give the thing in you direction. The FBI's a good place for people like us.'

She looked up, a surprised smile caught on her face. The last time Will had seen her in person, nearly two years ago, she'd looked childish still, baggy-eyed and slight in her overlarge college hoodie, and not like the woman she looked now.

'People like us?' she echoed.

'Anyway, Jack Crawford doesn't get involved with admissions. You want him to notice you, get in first, get into my class, and then don't drop out for a full term. That'll impress him.'

The idea of having Abigail in his class one day tightened Will's stomach into a thrumming knot. He would be happy to have her there, but having her there would mean sharing her, and sharing who Will was when he was with her: sharing it with the FBI, with Jack, with his students. If Abigail and Abigail's Will escaped the careful containment he'd kept them in, they might even reach, somehow, Hannibal—who was more like Abigail than Will had ever been, who had in common with her a childhood stained with violence, who'd most likely preordered Abigail's book and kept it now on his bedside table.

Will's childhood had been marked with more lows than highs, but it had been largely free of violence. There had been a brutality in his mother's abandonment, just as Will felt brutal now any time he came home to his dogs and not to his daughter, but that was the whole of the brutality Will could claim. Even when he was a child, he'd missed it. He'd missed it when he was a young man haunting the streets of New Orleans, eager for the bite of a knife. He'd missed it when he sat in Hannibal's lap for the first time and kissed him languidly, and when he watched Amelie sleep.

The only times he hadn't missed it had been in the immediate aftermath of brutality, in the time his flesh still thrummed with it. With his first, the relief of it was soured by the shock.

Killing Mason had been a messy, frantic affair, borne of a quick-boiled fury and the months of hushed conversations with Margot. He had not planned it, and in the aftermath, he had acted on instinct, setting up the scene as though he were a real killer, someone who did this so habitually that the act itself no longer satisfied him. He'd left Mason for the FBI to find because he'd wanted Margot and her children to be in peace, to know for sure; and, maybe more than that, because he could pretend then it had all been someone else.

In the months that followed, he'd wake often with nightmares: Mason's eyes bulging out of sockets, Mason's desperate cries under the weight of Will's body, Mason dying and living and dying again. He'd slip out of bed and go to Amelie's room, to run a hand over her body and convince himself it had been worth it, or, if he was not staying over in Baltimore, he'd find a picture of her on his phone.

When he'd killed his second, the shock was absent. Years had elapsed between Mason Verger and Garett Jacob Hobbs; Will had got married, had adopted a child, had been recruited by Jack Crawford for the job he'd always feared and craved. And yet, Will had been expecting this very thing from himself, all that time. He could not even pretend to be surprised.

He came home after killing Hobbs, his blood persistent under his fingernails, and stood in the doorway to the kitchen, watching his husband, who was still alive, and his daughter, whose throat was unblemished and whole. They had been fingerpainting. There was always an activity with Hannibal: arts and crafts, toddler swim class, cooking or baking or puppet theatre. If there'd been no activities, only the two of them would have remained, and Will knew this terrified Hannibal. Things between them had improved significantly by then, but still they required gentle handling. And they were being gentle about it: fingers dipped gently into paint, pads pressed gently against paper, scrunched noses scratched gently with the tip of the pinkie.

This is who you've done it for, Will had thought.

He had told Hannibal, when they'd first argued about Will taking on the case, that he looked at the girls and thought of Amelie.

'She is the wrong age and hair colour,' Hannibal had said dismissingly. 'It would not be Amelie.'

'I don't mean it would be her. You know what I mean.'

'You mean to offer yourself an excuse to go and do what you've always wanted, even though you know it's bad for you.'

'It's this one case. Then it's done.'

But it wasn't done. One case turned into two, turned into three, and Will was riding high on the power of it, high on the sense of purpose, high on having a thing that was not Hannibal's but only Will's own. He came home to his husband and his daughter, who were growing closer and stronger and safer, and he felt like he was alive.

Until death followed him home.

Abigail was standing up now, flattening the collar of her coat and brushing free the hair grasping at the static in the wool. They'd gone months between speaking, and they would again; it had forever been Abigail's whim that dictated the timeline of their relationship, while Will sat waiting, never knowing when the next call would come. He'd toyed with the idea of texting her to break their last silence, which had gone on for nearly a year before their coffee date now released him, but just the thinking had made him feel the intruder, and laughably afraid of a young girl.

'Keep me updated, yeah?' he said looking up at her, voice marred already by resignation. 'If the application goes through.'

'Sure.' Her mind was already elsewhere. 'Hey, Will—'

Will's pocket vibrated. Will raised a hand.

'Jack.' While the ringing always brought on an anxiety in Will, saying the name brought the comfort of the familiar. It was the name Will said the most often, these days; and Will's own name, when he thought of it, he could hear only in the gruff tone that Jack adopted when he felt bad for calling.

'Good news, Will. I got a Ripper case for you. How do you feel?'

'Ecstatic.' Will mirrored the tone. 'It's not the Ripper.'

'Man of little faith.'

'It's never the Ripper.' It never was. The Ripper and Will had an agreement to that very end.

'Come and look, then say that to my face.'

Will eyed Abigail. It was kind of her to wait until he was ready to say goodbye. He didn't want her to go.

'Who's the victim?' he asked. 'Just want to know what I'm in for this time.'

'It's not pretty, but at least it's a grown man.' Jack's voice skirted the edge of remorseful before he willed it away. 'A John Foster. He had his hospital bracelet on, so he was easy enough to identify. You can tell me why that is when you get here. I'm sending you the address.'

Will disconnected without a goodbye. He couldn't breathe well enough to manage it.

'You okay?'

He looked at Abigail. He wouldn't be able to say *yes* and lie, so he shook his head with a grin that split his face painfully, hoping that was reassurance enough.

'Want to come with me?'

‘To the crime scene?’

‘To the crime scene. Get a head start on your illustrious FBI career. I tell you what to say, you say it. Easy enough.’

‘I don’t know that Jack Crawford will be happy about that.’

‘There’s a body that could be a Ripper. Jack’s mood is shot already.’

They drove separately. Will turned the radio on max and tried to drown out the growing panic. There were many John Fosters in the world. Some of them probably also frequented hospitals. He would not panic until he was sure he had a thing to panic about.

When he realised Jack’s address was taking him to a church, small and peeling with age, it became hard to remember why he shouldn’t jump to conclusions.

John Foster lay stretched on the floor before the altar, his naked body cushioned from the cold seep of the alabaster by cheap-looking bed sheets, spread around him like a stain of blackened blood. His mouth was edged open, as if in a gasp or a scream. His skin was a sickly yellow beneath the press of the rope, which bit into what little flesh illness had left him, twined around thigh and shoulder and neck. A noose. The rope kept his knees open, too, his feet tucked in close to the hip.

He made for an obscene picture. Will did not feel repulsed. Instead, he saw that the man had dark, curly hair like him, and this filled him with such a burning sadness and love for Molly that he had to look away to shield his eyes from the feeling.

Behind Will, Jack was telling Abigail she shouldn’t be here.

‘Leave her be,’ Will remembered to demand. ‘She’s learning.’

‘What is wrong with you?’ Jack asked. ‘There *is* something very wrong with you, bringing her here—of all places—I swear, Will. This isn’t *bring your kid to work* day. We don’t do that day. We definitely don’t do *bring your true crime celebrity to work* day.’

‘I’m twenty-three,’ Abigail said, with all the severity her age required. ‘And I can sign a copy for you, if you like.’

‘I got my unsolicited Freddie Lounds-signed copy in the mail, thank you.’

In the distance, Price and Zeller were whispering, with obvious glances thrown in Abigail’s direction. Beverly had clearly been singled out for reconnaissance. When she’d got close enough to catch his expression, Will tried to smile at her. He felt it turn nightmarish around the panic brewing in him, and he chastised himself for trying.

‘Vic got all cleaned-out on the inside,’ she reported without preamble. ‘Guts, lungs, heart. He left the cancerous kidneys, and the liver to be safe—some metastasis there.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ said Will stupidly.

Beverly eyed him, then decided to ignore him. ‘The Ripper took his, uh—reproductive organs is the nice name for it, I think. You probably spotted that.’

‘I thought Will said it wasn’t the Ripper,’ Abigail cut in.

‘Beverly Katz.’ She peeled off the glove and shook Abigail’s hand. ‘An honour and a pleasure, but I do need to tell you that my colleagues over there are very sad they didn’t get a mention in the book. If you ever do a sequel—anyway, you want me to tell you why Will is wrong?’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s the Ripper,’ said Will.

‘Convinced you, did I?’

‘You’re very convincing.’ Will wet his lip. There was a lot that was obvious about this which Will would not be able to cover up. How forthcoming to be? ‘Jack. I know him.’

Jack rounded on him at once, eyes blazing. ‘What do you mean you know him?’

‘I mean, I know—his wife is a friend of mine. I never met him.’

‘You sure this is the guy?’

‘Maybe. Yes.’

‘Then what the hell is this, Will? What do you see?’

Will hesitated. ‘I don’t know. I’m not—I don’t feel clear on that. I’ve not been clear for a while. Think I’m coming down with something.’

‘Take an aspirin.’

Will laughed. ‘I did.’

‘Alright.’ Jack’s voice made it plain what he thought about getting sick. ‘Clearly this is about sex. That’s heavy-handed. The sheets are cheap, washed-through, maybe from a motel. We’re still trying to find which one. You with me so far?’

Will swallowed hard around the weight in his stomach. ‘Yeah.’

‘What did he do to offend the Ripper, then? Stopped him getting any sleep?’

Beverly bit her lip to keep the snort in.

‘That wasn’t a joke.’ Jack glared at her. ‘If there is any chance the Ripper knows this guy personally—but then that’s too much of a coincidence, isn’t it? And according to *our* profile, the Ripper takes virtual strangers. But if they stayed at the same motel, at least—’

‘I think it’s about more than sex. Look at the rope—three strands. A union between man, woman and God.’ Beverly hunched by the side of the body, prodding at the ties. ‘And recognise the knot?’

‘True lover’s knot,’ Will admitted unhappily. ‘Another symbol of marriage.’

‘Will says he knows the guy’s wife. Maybe the vic cheated?’ Beverly suggested. ‘Does that offend the Ripper now?’

Will didn’t answer. There was a silence, stretching.

And into the silence, John Foster stood. He peeled himself from the ground, moving his limbs with difficulty against the strain of rope and the added weight of death, and he hobbled toward Will, bare feet squeaky on the marble steps.

He took Will’s hand. His fingers were a shock of cold against Will’s wrist. They made Will feel hot, boiling over, burning from within.

‘He touched me wrong,’ John Foster wheezed, his eyes pools of revulsion and fear. ‘He did it all wrong. This is all wrong, do you see? Don’t let him touch me again, please don’t let him.’

And Will’s hands were clammy, Will’s heartbeat was rabbit-fast, his eyelids sticky with whatever new secretion his body had released—he was all secretions now, all sweat and tears and—and John Foster was back on the ground, back with the dead, but Will had *seen him*—he had *felt him*, not like it was a dream, not like it was the touch of an imagined hand in a memory or fantasy, not like—*what is happening to me?*

‘Maybe it wasn’t this man who offended the Ripper. Maybe it was Will.’

Jack’s eyes snapped to Abigail. Will didn’t bother, knowing what was coming, resigned to it. He tried to brush some of the sweat off on his coat, but it only made the loose fibres stick to his palms.

‘Will is married,’ Abigail offered hesitantly, made nervous by Jack’s glare.

‘Separated,’ corrected Will.

‘What if the Ripper found out somehow that Will was—friends—with this man’s wife?’ Abigail shot him a look, which he didn’t meet. ‘And if he took offence to that, I mean—he’ll know who Will is by now. Catching all those killers but never able to catch *the one.* And that could build resentment, or scorn, or—or admiration. And if you get put on a pedestal by a monster, you’d better not step one toe out of line.’

They all had the same thought, hearing the emotion behind the statement as it left Abigail’s mouth, but no one wanted her to know. They looked away, cowardly in the face of her tragedy.

For Will, there was another component to the feeling, and it was nausea; though he couldn’t decide if he felt sick because of the splitting headache, his constant companion of late, or because of what Hannibal had done.

‘I’m assigning you an armed escort,’ decreed Jack.

‘No.’

‘This isn’t a discussion.’

‘It’s just a theory. This might as well have nothing to do with me.’

‘I don’t hear you arguing with the theory. You brought the girl here, you refused to contribute, you made me listen to her. Now I’m listening to her.’

Will glanced at his watch. ‘I need to go.’

‘Not without an escort, you don’t. And we’re not done here.’

‘I *am* done,’ repeated Will curtly, in the tone he hadn’t known he had in him until he became a parent. ‘I’m already late for mediation. If the Ripper does want something with me, then I’m going to go get a head-start on divorcing my husband. Hopefully I can get that done before you find him with his dick cut off, too.’

Better than the first man Will had killed, he remembered the first man Hannibal had killed.

He hadn’t been the first, of course. Will hadn’t known that then. He’d known only that his hands were stained with the blood of the officer who’d died in Will’s arms; that he could not hear out of his left ear, that he could smell the sharp bite of gunpowder wafting off his skin more than he could smell the blood in his mouth; that Tobias Budge had gone. Will should have waited for Jack’s team to arrive, or gone in pursuit, or *something,* but he had forbidden Hannibal from seeing Franklyn Froideveaux until this case was resolved, and Hannibal often merely pretended to do as he was told.

Trembling and nauseous, he’d arrived at the door to his husband’s office just in time to see him land the death blow.

The scene would replay itself in Will’s mind countless times over the next weeks, months, years—even today, he saw it sometimes in the small hours, when insomnia clutched him tight, when there was no hope left of sleep and no room left for judgement. The sickening crunch of a broken skull would echo in Will’s ears. The blood would again splatter on Hannibal’s shirt collar; his hair would sweep over his wild eyes, pupils blown black and wide, his mouth edged open in a snarl of teeth. The stag statue, discarded. The life was draining out of Tobias Budge, flat and still at Hannibal’s feet. And then Hannibal, body tense with savagery and primed for another kill, then Hannibal looked up to see Will frozen in the doorway, and then, in the small hours of the night as Will and his shame lay side-by-side in the lonely bed, then Will remembered that look, and he came in his hand.

This was how Will explained it to himself—because Hannibal certainly had not explained, merely stood there blank and mute, and then clung to Will when Will let him—something in Hannibal which had always been broken, but scabbed and holding, had finally come loose. A

dangerous man had walked into his office with blood on his hands, and he had told him he had killed Will, that Will was dead; and the thing broke clean in Hannibal, there was no more thought in him only that broken thing, coiled in wait too long. It snapped its teeth once, killing Franklyn, the easy prey; snapped again, killed Tobias.

Will got him sitting down in the chair by the desk. He cleaned the blood off his face, bandaged the cut on his head, pried his shirt off and helped him into a clean one. He brought in a mop to try and soak in what he could off the floor before it set in. The bleach he'd found in the cabinet stood open by the piano. In the face of Hannibal's numb compliance, Will found his own hands stilling, his pain fading, his mind clear.

'He came to kill Franklyn,' was the first thing Hannibal said to him. 'I thought you were dead.'

'I'm not dead. And he didn't Franklyn. You killed Franklyn.'

He'd had the temerity for one lie, but apparently no more. He looked away from Will. 'You haven't called Jack.'

'Call him and say what? That you murdered your patient?'

'You're being very harsh, Will.'

'I'm not trying to be harsh. I'm saying it how it is.'

'And what will you do? When you're done saying it how it is?'

Will had got the last of the blood spray off the surface of the desk. He put the sponge aside.

'That's for me to worry about,' he said. 'You go get Amelie from school. Tell her you collided with a cyclist.'

Hannibal gazed up at him, some of the numbness making way for an expression better known to Will: curiosity.

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'You're thinking something. What, that I'm calm?'

'Yes. Surprisingly so.'

'I'm calm because I look at dead bodies for a living. Not because I've done this before.'

This startled a laugh out of Hannibal. It made Will melt a little, though he did not show it: he thought it was important to keep perfect equanimity, to keep a rein on emotion in case Hannibal could not. 'Are you reassuring me you're not secretly a serial killer, Will?'

'It must have crossed your mind. With the sort of work I do. The sort of things I say.'

‘Like when you told me you were going to coerce me into killing my unborn children, yes. I remember.’

The old shame awakened and burned. Surprised that he would still remember and annoyed in equal measure, Will fixed his eyes on his work—tending to his own damaged fingers, skin mauled from Tobias’s wire—and regretted his decision to keep Hannibal calm and not fight.

‘I didn’t tell you I was going to. I only told you I could.’

‘Let me, Will.’

‘What?’

‘Your hands.’

‘No.’

‘You are not a psychopath, Will.’

Will gave up on the hands and stepped closer. His knees brushed against Hannibal’s. He bent one, pushing Hannibal and the chair ever so slightly to the right, then back again.

‘Neither are you,’ he said. ‘You know that?’

‘I’ve just killed an innocent man.’

‘And how does that make you feel?’

Will heard in his pause that he was considering a lie. ‘I feel sorry for Franklyn,’ he admitted. ‘But I am not sorry.’

‘Do you remember,’ asked Will, ‘when you first came to my office, six years ago, and wanted me to tell you if you were going to kill someone?’

He wasn’t looking, but the smile bled through Hannibal’s voice. ‘I think you’re remembering it differently than I am.’

‘I’m remembering it right. And do you remember what I said?’

‘Yes. You said, *if it ends in blood, let there be blood.* There has certainly been blood.’

Will made himself look. The fight was gone from Hannibal’s eyes. They were bright now, not dark; full and glimmering, and Will could see his own face reflected in the light.

‘There has been blood,’ he echoed. ‘But nothing’s ended.’

Will did not come home until dawn. He let himself in, toed off his shoes, hung up his coat. Upstairs, he shushed Belle’s barking and petted her until his hands gave out. He felt the weight of the bodies in his shoulders and arms, in the back he bent and the thighs that burned.

New sunlight slitted itself on Amelie's bed, where she and Hannibal lay side-by-side, blinking blearily and annoyed with the dog. They'd kicked the sheets off, the day's warmth already setting in. Will saw their bare feet, two big and two small but all four such similar shape, and he wanted to laugh at the happiness that bubbled in him.

He'd scrubbed clean in the house in Wolf Trap. He wore sweats now to help the raw skin heal, and he slipped easily into bed, hiding the smile in Amelie's hair in case it upset Hannibal to see it. She smelled like the shampoo Hannibal bought for her, and like the bitter aftertaste of a night well-slept.

'Daddy,' she whined, throaty and frustrated. 'I'm sleeping. Why are you loud?'

'Sorry, sugar bug. You can go back to sleep.'

'No, because now you waked me, and I didn't talk to you all day.'

'I know. How about you tell me one thing now, and then everything else we can talk about after we sleep some more?'

She whined and harrumphed more as she considered, wriggling in Will's embrace and driving a knee into Hannibal's shoulder, who gave no appearance of having felt it. Will watched the whites of her eyes, peeking from behind the lashes, and wondered if Hannibal had looked at all like her when he was a boy, back before everything.

'Do you know what's five add five?' was what Amelie settled on telling him.

'Is it ten?' Will whispered.

'No. It's trillion-billion-babillion.'

'I don't think that's right.'

'My teacher knows Math and she told me. You don't go to school, so you don't know.'

'I used to go to school. I'm pretty sure they taught me five add five was ten.'

'When you were little,' Amelie agreed. 'The world has moved on.'

She rolled on her stomach and promptly fell asleep. Hannibal put his hand around the thumb she'd instinctively drawn toward her mouth. The silence from him gave Will the feeling he might never speak again unless Will drew it out of him.

'Did you sleep?' he asked gently, unsurprised when all he got in turn was a barely-there shake of the head. 'You need to sleep.'

'You are the one who spent the night burying bodies,' Hannibal pointed out sourly.

'So?'

'It would have been better to let me stay. I am stronger than you.'

Will didn't think Hannibal was all the way aware of how childish he sounded. He thought it best not to draw attention to it. 'You are,' he agreed. 'But not right now.'

When Hannibal scoffed, he sounded like Amelie had when Will had questioned her math. It should have made Will sweet and calm, but he'd been forcing calm for hours and hours now —cleaning the office, disposing of the bodies, selling a lie to Jack, quieting Hannibal's fear— his body was rebelling against him.

'Hannibal,' he whispered. 'I—damn it.' He laughed, self-conscious and shamed.

'You've buried two bodies for me, and you're afraid to ask?'

'I can't—I don't know how I'll take it if you say no.'

Hannibal pushed himself up to stand. His hair fell into his eyes, obscuring the look in them; and thank God it did. He said, 'I won't say no.'

And so, Will had him on his back as the eager summer sun bathed their bedroom golden. It was rough and selfish and messy, and Will's muscles screamed and gave out on him, and he fell over Hannibal and crowded him higher up the bed, cursing his failing strength and his failing patience, and throughout he heard only the soft, broken sounds of Hannibal's laugh in his ear.

Ever since he'd killed his first, Will had known deep-down that he would one day kill another. About Hannibal, he'd known the same thing, but where for himself he'd felt only resignation, with Hannibal he could never decide on the best name for the feeling. Was it fear? Guilt? Pity?

Anticipation?

Four months after Tobias, following a baffling text, he found Hannibal by the side of a road, standing over the body of a hitchhiker. Six months after Tobias, he found a body in the trunk of Hannibal's car. Three months after that, while Amelie was visiting with Tommy, Hannibal killed a man over their dinner table, ruining both the food and the overpriced flower arrangement ordered in for their anniversary. That time, Will pretended to be annoyed about the spoilt dinner and slapped him across the face, then let Hannibal fuck him for it, though all the while he thought only, *what am I doing? Am I doing this to him? If I am doing this to him, can I stop?*

Every time, Will would clean up the mess. He would tend to any cuts or bruises sustained in the mindlessness, he would speak softly, he would wash and bleach and burn evidence. He would go to work and pursue killers with the single-mindedness of a hunting dog, and he would come home and nurse his own killer back to health. It should have shattered him, destroyed him, it should have broken his heart; and it did, in those moments when he thought that Hannibal had killing on his mind because he slept every night on the pillow Will slept on, because every night he spent pressed in too close to Will, breathing in Will's fears and desires and horrible, horrible dreams—when he thought that if Will were a different man, he

would do this better, he would know how to help him stop, how to help him come back to them without having to stain his hands with blood, without losing the man he'd built—

But outside of these moments, Will continued doing nothing better, nothing right. Because when it came down to it, Will had always felt himself to be the weaker link: younger, less worldly, less resistant to stress, less sociable, less successful, less the father and husband Hannibal was. And here, finally, was Will's revenge, here was Will's reclaiming of power, here was Will's victory—he was in control where Hannibal could not be. And no matter how guilty he felt about it, Will would not give up his upper hand.

Soon, though. Soon he would know the truth: that even that small victory, even that illusion of power, even this had been a lie.

Will wasn't there anymore. He was in a car, headed away from a crime scene that wasn't meant to be. He looked in the rearview, expecting fully to see Amelie in the backseat, face scrunched up with tears at the indignity. She'd once spent an hour-long drive wailing to be allowed to ride in the front; even Hannibal, ordinarily unmoved, had looked by the end of it like he was considering driving them all off the road. A smile split Will's face at the memory, and he was going to distract Amelie with the story—then realised promptly that the backseat was empty. Amelie had been riding in the front seat for years now. The screaming was a thing of the past. She could no longer be easily distracted by stories. Years had gone by in the blink of Will's eye, between one glance at the mirror and the realisation he was living in the wrong time.

Something was wrong. He would be googling late-onset schizophrenia again tonight. He would be googling symptoms of a mental break. He would be asking himself if this was worth diagnosing, if there was any answer he might be willing to hear.

The mediator's office opened for Will. And there he sat: eyes trained on the door, that expectant look on his face that Will had once gone stupid and desperate for, back before he'd known better—before he'd known that it was not for Will, this look, only for Will's misstep, Will's mistake, Will's naivety.

'Will.' He gazed, still, and Will felt himself go weak in the knees in some latent fucking Pavlov's response. 'We were about to give up on you.'

'Stand up. Stand up—get up.'

Hannibal took measure of him. 'No.'

'I'm not talking to you like—stand up.'

'No.'

Hannibal stayed sitting. The mediator stood. She approached Will like he was a child brandishing a knife. 'Will. Did something happen? You look very pale. Why don't you sit down?'

Will stepped outside her reach, closer to Hannibal, towering over him now, so close their knees could have brushed. They didn't. It should have felt good to look down at him for once, but Will felt only humiliated—only smaller and weaker, standing there, only like the losing party in a fast-ending battle.

'We had a deal,' he spat. 'You promised me—'

'Yes. You made me many promises, too.' Hannibal's voice was cold. 'We know what happened to those.'

'You knew the deal. You knew the deal for letting her stay—'

Hannibal stood.

'Are you threatening me, Will?' He took a step, too close for Will's comfort, who edged back again. 'You're shaking. I did think you'd likely been called away to a scene. Was it really so bad?'

'It was hammy and disgusting,' Will sneered. 'It was pitiful, rushed, hackneyed—' And it went to Will's head, the miniscule twitch of Hannibal's lip, the one emotional response Will seemed able to elicit in him. At least there was this; at least he could make him angry. 'And when he touched my hand, he told me he didn't want you to touch him. You were doing it wrong—'

'Will. Who told you?'

'He—he told me.' Will froze, swallowed, realised. 'No one. I was—imaging things. Got a bit too lost in recreating the scene. I do that.'

'You don't,' said Hannibal with unearned confidence. 'What did you see, Will?'

'Nothing! I didn't see anything. I'm not—' The panic was setting back in. He wanted to hit him, but then he would for sure get kicked out of here; and if he bloodied him, there would be a phone call to the police.

Just as he thought it, an expression passed over Hannibal's face—

'What? What is it? There, that look—what did you just smell on me? His blood? What, her fucking perfume? You're thinking something now—what *is* it?'

He knew that expression, he knew that shallowness in his eyes when he was lying. Will felt feverish with needing to wring the truth from him, feverish with heartbreak and anger, feverish in general—he palmed at his pockets in search of another aspirin, and only then realised that he really was shaking like Hannibal had said.

'I could tell you,' Hannibal mused. 'But I would have to lie, or else I'd only displease you again. That is all the truth does, with you. It is only ever hammy, as you put it. Only ever *pitiful*. You say you want the truth, but when you get it, you find it unpalatable.'

Will shoved him. It didn't do very much; force meets immovable object, and Will was hardly unstoppable these days. He was afraid briefly he would fall, and that he'd have to watch Hannibal choose not to catch him.

'Alright, let's de-escalate this before someone does something they will regret—'

'It was never about the truth,' Will hissed. 'It was about you allowing me to believe things about who you are, about who *we* were, that weren't true.'

Hannibal regarded him, impassive. 'I allowed you to believe only what you wanted to believe,' he responded finally. 'Is that not what we all do when we desire someone?

'You don't—' Will tried to breathe. The fever was taking this, too. 'You didn't desire me.'

'I did, then.'

'No.' He shook his head desperately, hoping to dislodge the mass in his throat. 'You didn't have to desire me, Hannibal. You had me. We were married.'

And if Will's voice broke on the last word, did it matter? He had shown himself already to be the loser, the broken man left behind, the one to forever pay the price.

'You once told me our marriage was a sham,' said Hannibal, because he had to remember every stupid word Will had ever said.

'It was,' said Will now, bitter and wanting to feel cruel. 'I felt it then. I know it now.'

Hannibal went to sit down.

'My apologies,' he said to their mediator. 'I fear we got a little carried away.'

'We need to discuss this, gentlemen. Clearly something happened I am not aware of, and I don't think either of you will be able to progress until we have resolved the issue. A glass of water, maybe. Will?'

'The issue,' said Hannibal, 'is that Will appears to be conflating fantasy with reality. I do not know the reason for the confusion or for this aggression now, but despite what he may claim, it is not normal behaviour for him. I feel we have to table everything else for the time and have another look at custody arrangements. I'm afraid I simply no longer feel comfortable with my daughter spending the night.'

'Kill yourself,' said Will.

'Let's not rush things,' the mediator intervened. She'd gone a little pale. 'If custody changes are necessary, we will discuss them, but this is not something we want to threaten in anger.'

'I am hardly threatening. It is a simple observation. Unless, of course, there were another responsible adult present during the visits. Do you think your friend might be willing to move in, Will? There is nothing to stop her now, and Amelie would have a playmate, too. I suppose we shall see.'

There was an insistent buzzing in Will’s ear that was part tinnitus and part scream. He could not be here anymore.

He heard the mediator call after him. The moment he stepped into the stairway, the scream in his ear grew, loud and louder, and if Hannibal had called after him, too, it would have been lost in the scream—though Will did not suppose that he had.

Because the worst of it was that Hannibal was right: he was always right, every time, in increasingly perverse and tragic ways. Molly and Will were to each other as dreams, and if ever dreams were realised, they turned irrevocably into nightmares. There would be no little boys thundering up the creaking wooden stairway of Wolf Trap, there would be no extra helpings of dessert at dinner and no rushed kisses before sleepiness took hold. Soon enough, there would be Will only: hands tucked into armpits to stop them shaking, liver sitting heavy with drink, and that scream in his ear, loud and clear, keeping him company.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back from my break! Should resume regular updates now.

Next week, we're back in the past with Hannibal and his newly acquired child. What will the man think of next?
a) He'll decide to kill his baby.
b) He'll decide to kill Will.
c) He'll decide to marry Will.
d) A secret fourth thing.

Best guess wins!

Nine years before the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

> *It wasn't merely the baby's development—the appearance of the first teeth, the first communication strategies, the first realisations of the boundaries of her own being—that interested Hannibal. It also entertained him to play the family man.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eleven.
Nine years before the Christmas Eve party.

In the first years of Amelie's life, Hannibal killed no one.

He had taken extended breaks from killing before, though not one had felt as long. Playing the part of killer was a time-consuming affair which often left Hannibal with a less-than-ideal amount of creative energy to be spent elsewhere; and so, when he wished to dedicate himself to a particular course of study or artistic exploration, he would stop. Child-rearing, even aided by Will's newfound dedication, affected the rest of his life in a similar way killing did, and it was difficult to see how he would negotiate the two when he barely slept three hours a night as things stood.

Once Amelie's demands on his time lessened, and he was able to return part-time to his practice, he flicked through his rolodex half-heartedly but found no immediate desire to indulge. If he sourced meat, there would be no party to serve it at, as he lacked the energy still to throw one. If he wished for a display, he would need to take two full nights to himself or more, then field Will's questions, which would end surely in upset feelings and a melatonin supplement left passive-aggressively on his bedside table. If one did something, one should do it well or else not bother; Hannibal believed this.

He had come close to killing once, in that time. It had been when Amelie was six months old, on one of the rare nights when Will was away at Wolf Trap. Amelie had spent the day fussy and tearful, pushing food away and kicking frustratedly at the air, red-faced and inconsolable. When by midnight she would not calm, Hannibal took her temperature a third time and discovered at last a rapid-onset spike well over the hundred-mark. She was screaming and wheezing at intervals, and her skin had become hot to the touch and unpleasantly wet.

On the way to emergency, Hannibal played music to try and relax her into breathing, which had no effect. When he glanced back to check her face for discolouration, he thought he saw the faintest suggestion of blue beginning to set around her lips. If she suffocated on the way to the hospital, Will could not blame Hannibal, though would certainly turn on himself: if he

had been there that night, he might have realised sooner something was very wrong, he might have sensed the encroaching death in her, he might have driven faster. Hannibal hadn't called him before setting off, seeing no point in it. Will's anxiety would be only another thing for him to manage, and he had to focus now on the infant.

At emergency, Amelie was given oxygen and paracetamol, which it only then occurred to Hannibal he might have well administered himself, if only he'd had the correct equipment. The tubes that went into her nose were miniscule, thin as veins, and would need to be purchased and stocked. He held her, knowing the familiar smell and feel of him would calm her better than any amount of cooing and rocking by the nurse, but he resented the weight of her, the awful heat of her, the gasps and mewls she continued to make. They told him if she improved, he would be able to take her home in the morning, but he did not want to. Once they went home, she might get sick again; Hannibal might watch the blue spread from her lips to the rest of her face.

Her frailty usually charmed him. There was an elegance to it, an ironic vitality that was a *despite,* that went against the odds. But at the hospital, holding her now, he looked down on it, annoyed at the pointlessness of the effort. He imagined taking her by the neck, where her head rested now, its fine dusting of baby hair soft as silk, and snapping her done.

He thought he should give the baby to the nurse, *now,* but couldn't make himself do it.

He found his phone and called Will.

Will's voice was sleep-addled when he answered, low and full of gravel.

'Hello?'

'We're at the hospital.' Hannibal did not want to talk about it. The only reason he'd called was to give his hands something *else* to do. 'Amelie spiked a fever. She's on oxygen now.'

There was the sound of Will scrambling to get out of bed. The dog barked. Hannibal could sense his agitation, and again he found himself annoyed rather than charmed.

'Is she going to be okay?'

'I don't know,' said Hannibal.

'I'm—do you want me to come?'

Hannibal wondered what Will would do if he said no. Of course he was going to say yes. He wanted Will to come, and take the baby from him, and keep it; he never wanted to touch her again.

Amelie survived Hannibal's hold on her that night, and she survived the bronchiolitis. They arrived home in the morning confused and upset by the harsh light, saying little to each other that didn't concern immediate necessities. Once he'd fed and changed the baby, Will left to pick up the dog and bring her with. He would be staying until Amelie was fully recovered.

Hannibal disliked him leaving and made this clear, ignoring his angling for a kiss goodbye and removing Amelie upstairs so he would not be able to plant one on her forehead, either. Rather than place her in her cot, he took her to his bed, the better to monitor any lingering symptoms, and he lay down next to her, heavy and slow with tiredness. She wasn't crying any longer but watched him with limpid eyes, which had changed their colour from infant blue to a deep maroon. Her chin shone with phlegm and saliva.

The instinct to kill her before she could die was fading from Hannibal. He reminded himself Will was coming back. He reminded himself that he was not going to kill the baby, that he had never been slave to instinct, that he was simply overtired and feeling unlike himself.

He must have slipped into sleep for a minute, because when the baby started whimpering again, his eyes were closed. He gave her his fingers to nibble at with her hardening gums, which she normally enjoyed, but she only continued making pitiful noises of frustration.

'What is it?' Hannibal asked, only realising he'd spoken Lithuanian once the question had left his mouth. He struggled to recall the last time he'd used his mother tongue outside of dreams. Though it felt odd and surreal on his lips, it also came easily, like it had been lying in wait.

'You should try not to get sick again if you don't like it,' he spoke slowly, fine with the sounds but struggling to remember the grammar. 'I don't know how you did it in the first place, Amelie. It was Will, likely, and his masses of students. They never eat well, do they?'

Amelie, who had learnt from Will's frequent instruction the skill of turn-taking, waited for him to be done before she blew a wet raspberry in response.

'We will have Will move in here,' Hannibal decided. 'He will not allow you to die. We can be reasonably certain of that, I think. Yes?'

More raspberries came, coupled with violent kicking, which Hannibal chose graciously to interpret as agreement.

Will moved in two weeks later. Hannibal quickly began to find his presence grating. Will cleaned well but in his own, bizarre way and order. Will folded Hannibal's sweaters the way he folded his own sweaters. Will's dog scratched and howled at Hannibal's bedroom door until she was let in. Hannibal took all this in stride because he understood the intrusions to be necessary, just as Margot's had been during her pregnancy, for the continued survival of the baby, and for Hannibal's continued experience of the baby in turn, which had been, on balance, diverting and enjoyable.

It wasn't merely the baby's development—the appearance of the first teeth, the first communication strategies, the first realisations of the boundaries of her own being—that interested Hannibal. It also entertained him to play the family man. There was a pleasing novelty to the mundane chores of negotiating work and caretaking schedules; to debating the choice of stroller; to planning meals that accounted for the tastes of three people and a dog. Hannibal slipped easily into the role, and he excelled in its delivery. Will, meanwhile, still hit

the wrong note, still fumbled awkwardly where a little self-assurance could only ease things along, still second-guessed and still provoked with his temper and sullenness in turn. Hannibal's performance remained flawless regardless of the trials Will put him through. He knew this annoyed Will, too, that he wished Hannibal would snap, raise his voice, slam a door; Hannibal revelled in forever denying him the satisfaction.

Still, there remained behaviours Will exhibited that were mysteries to Hannibal.

He had understood by that point that there was a possessiveness to Will and a desire in him to excel; Hannibal made certain that neither of the drives were ever fully satisfied lest Will grew complacent. And so, when Hannibal spoke to Amelie, it was always in a language Will did not understand, and while they discussed only things Hannibal's limited mastery of his mother tongue allowed—spoons and plates, dogs and kittens, the names of Amelie's fingers—these were conversations Will could not be privy to. To compound the feeling of failure and of exclusion, Hannibal took Will's coat as he might have done for a guest, and he offered him a drink whenever he came home. He never showed Will where the laundry detergent was kept or where to find spare kitchen towels. If Will wanted a thing done, he had to come and ask Hannibal, who would smile and do it for him.

Hannibal waited for Will's anger at being denied his rightful place to reach tipping point, but this never manifested. Instead, Will had gone on searches through the house, Amelie tottering in front of him with both her hands fisted around his fingers. Hannibal could hear him say, *Let's see where Tėtis hides his towels from me,* and Amelie's answering babble. Will called him this now, *Tėtis,* having asked for a translation—this was readily provided, because Hannibal did generally do the things Will asked—and Hannibal wondered why he bothered, when so easily he might have convinced Amelie he was the father and Hannibal merely the usurper. They had the real thing, between them, the thing Will had talked about, affectionate and possessive in equal measure, and Hannibal could see already that Amelie instinctively preferred it: going to Will first, turning her head to Will, reaching for Will when she cried.

No tipping point for the anger came. Instead, a mail order arrived for Will one day with dozens of picture books in Lithuanian, shipped from across an ocean. Hannibal read these to Amelie dutifully, and he read himself the adult novels and cookbooks Will had ordered, too, pleased to see that after a little practice his pace increased, and he no longer had to re-read the more complex sentences.

Instead, Will argued and sulked, yes, but he also made such eager, genuine effort that Hannibal was left at a loss. What did he want—what was all this trying to achieve, and what possible use might Will have for it?

The answer came to Hannibal finally on a pleasant spring morning in early April, when they ventured south to Downs Park to meet Alana for a nature walk. It would have been better, Hannibal had thought that morning as he packed them all lunch, to invite her to Wolf Trap, where they would have had nature galore and a functioning kitchen both. But Will rarely invited anyone to Wolf Trap, least of all Hannibal, so public park it was.

The park's trees were already budding green, and fresh grass brushed stretches of unpaved ground. They took a trail down to the beach. Amelie was fascinated with the sound her feet made on the wooden walkways and on the wooden stairs built into muddy ground. She

stopped periodically to kick and jump, testing her newfound balance and occasionally landing face-first on the ground. Every time she did, Dottie circled back to nudge her along, as though she were herding a difficult lamb.

The waters of the bay glimmered silvery, the pencil-thin waves gimlet and alive like newborn sea dragons. Amelie pointed at the sea and panted excitedly, though she clung to Will's leg in case. Dottie raced to the edge of the waters, then came back dark and odd-looking. The smell of wet dog would linger in the car for weeks.

Will eventually picked Amelie up and carried her to the water's edge. Hannibal hung back with Alana, but across the distance he could hear Will's gentle quizzing, *where's the sea? That's the sea, yeah. Show me, where's Dottie? Where's the dog? And where's Tėtis? Over there? Where's Will?*

'They're very close,' Alana commented. It seemed a strange thing to comment on, to Hannibal: what else would father and daughter be? 'It has to be a big help.'

'It is.'

'Although I feel I have the duty to report that Will is really milking this at work.' Laughter rang in her voice. 'Just the other day, I heard him say he couldn't take Jensen's class—Jensen is—'

'I know.'

'That he couldn't take Jensen's class for the week because his boyfriend's daughter had the sniffles. He called them that, too, do you know?'

'It might be allergies,' Hannibal said blankly. 'We're seeing a specialist next week.'

Alana had more questions to ask about this, which Hannibal answered without paying attention. She had meant the suggestion to strike humorous—that Hannibal and Amelie could not manage a case of the sniffles without Will—but she had inadvertently revealed to Hannibal a grimmer truth: that Will did not aspire to be part of their family, to be father or partner, but merely the facilitator. No wonder he took no offense at Hannibal denying him equal status; he did not want it. All that mattered to Will was believing he was essential to them, that he was needed, that without him Hannibal and Amelie would not know to talk with each other, would not have books to read, would not know how to keep each other alive.

On the shore, Will and Amelie were waving. Hannibal waved back, swallowed with urgent need to conceal what he feels. And he felt this: that he was standing on this beach today, the man he was now and with the life he led now, exclusively because of Will; that it had all been done for Will and with Will in mind; that Will had done this to him and would not take responsibility, not follow through, not even deign to call his own child anything else but *his boyfriend's daughter*—and that Hannibal would kill him for it.

The act could not be performed with any amount of haste. While Hannibal had begun to feel more confident in relating to an infant, when Amelie entered her toddler years he felt himself harden again. The features of her face were changing, turning more human and more expressive by the day; her previously uncomplicated smiles took on the meaning cues of coyness and rebellion, supplication and victory. Hannibal spoke with her still and tended to her needs and desires as required, but he had to hide his own displeasure at being answered with words that had taken on shape, at being performed for, clung to, touched. Her hair had grown in enough to curl gently at the ears, and there were days when Hannibal detested the softness of it, couldn't bear to brush it, wash it, even to place hats over her head. Soon enough, he knew, he might not be able to touch her at all.

The worse it got, the more Will liked it. Hannibal allowed him the advantage, bolstering himself with the knowledge that he would kill him, and soon. The one thing delaying him was Amelie, who couldn't be left without a father and for whom Hannibal would not be able to care adequately otherwise. He would only prove Will right if he tried—and he could not bear the thought of proving Will right.

He could kill them both, he thought sometimes, and be done with it, but that would put a definitive end to the life he'd built for himself in Baltimore, which was a high price to pay. He had never killed a child as young, either, and suspected this might be a poor idea, considering—when he tried to imagine it, he felt the same nausea that rose in him when he felt at Amelie's hair, and if there was any discomfort Hannibal struggled to withstand, it was feeling nauseous.

The impasse did not particularly worry Hannibal. The right time would come, and in the meantime the intention helped structure his thinking and enjoy the build-up to the inevitable finale. Much like when he fantasised about finding Will butchering Mason Verger's body—an old, worn fantasy, but one he returned to often even now—it was Will's red-cheeked humiliation, the cruel touch of Will's insecure anger, the stomach-tightening struggle that brought Hannibal the greatest pleasure, and not the killing that would proceed.

In the evenings when sleep eluded him, he lay with Will by his side, watching his chest rise and fall, and thought of the shame Will would feel should he ever find out who it was he'd clung to in the shower tonight, who he'd begged to wrap his legs around him under the sheets and press down, whose child he had rocked to sleep. Will Graham, who went every morning to lecture FBI's best on how to spot a killer, could not spot the one who shared his home, or recognise the one that slept inside him.

In the mornings before Will woke, Hannibal slipped downstairs to let the dog out and start on breakfast, accompanied by the sun's first strokes of silver on the steel kitchen tops. He thought of Mason Veger, the last and sole undeserving recipient of the full flush of Will's violence. Hannibal battled then with the disappointment in Will, who had failed to repeat the act, who had shown himself to suffer guilt and shame in the aftermath yet never bothered to try again and do it better; and he wished at the same time that, if Will were destined to allow himself that release only the once, Hannibal could have been the one to accept the gift.

This could all be deliberated and enjoyed, to Hannibal's mind, in the meantime, the better to build the anticipation. At the end of it, he could dispose of Will with ease; he had got to know

him well enough by then to have thought of several ways that would ensure the least fuss possible. He thought of a new one even the very afternoon he'd gone out to choose the rings, when his mind was otherwise occupied. That's how easy it was.

The Saturday Hannibal and Will were engaged, they had taken Amelie to her first-ever ballet. It was a showing of *Beauty and the Beast* aimed at children a little more senior. Amelie was visibly precocious, though, and able to appreciate the arts with the natural curiosity of a blank-slate mind. She'd sat largely still in Will's lap throughout, neck craned and eyes wide with wonder, and the moment they'd returned home she'd sat them down in front of the fire to perform her recreation of the story, which included not a single story beat of the original ballet but translated aptly the elusive impression of a thing grand and complex, which her limited vocabulary would not have been able to adequately describe.

Hannibal and Will clapped for Amelie and for the dog, who had been apparently cast in the role of Beast but was continuously referred to as *Belle.* Hannibal folded an origami flower to toss on stage. Amelie spent a little more time practising her pirouettes until she grew dizzy, tripped and hit her head against the edge of the coffee table, at which point she lost some of her appreciation for the art and came to sit in Will's lap, swallowing back tears. She was nearly old enough now to keep a rein on her little tragedies. She would wail if she expected to gain a thing from them but turn silent and tearful if she wanted to seem brave. Will petted her absent-mindedly, rocking his knees there and back, and once she'd dropped off to sleep, he refused to move.

'I think we need to buy the movie,' he whispered to Hannibal. 'Or a picture book or something. I'm pretty sure she got beauty and beast confused.'

'We will,' Hannibal agreed. He hadn't known then that they were embarking on a period of total and complete obsession, which would result in many such books and movies purchased, dresses bought, and their dog being officially and permanently renamed. 'She may have missed the intricacies of the story, but she understood the main thrust of it, I think.'

Will laughed. 'And what was the main *thrust* of it, Hannibal?'

'Beauty,' said Hannibal simply. 'The beauty of bodies, of music, of feeling, and the beauty of the primitive and the ugly.'

'Ah. Now I think of it, she did say all that to me in the bathroom earlier. Made an interesting observation about the symmetry of it, you know, that elevated femininity and the bestiality of the primitive—traced it back to classical aesthetics. And then we sang the *wash your hands* song.'

Hannibal pinched his ear and pulled until it was painful, and until he was close enough that Hannibal could kiss his neck without trying very hard.

'You were right though,' Will murmured. His head had fallen back, exposing the stark carotid and the perfect line of neck. 'She wasn't bored.'

'I am often right.'

‘Hmm—sometimes.’

In his arms, Amelie grunted and turned. The small sound was difficult for Hannibal to hear, and he bit into Will’s neck gently to distract himself. Once he’d let go, he left behind a red stain of subdermal bleeding and a trail of saliva.

‘Would you marry me, Will?’

‘What?’ Will chuckled sleepily. ‘Yeah, I don’t know. Probably.’

‘Will you?’

Will’s eyes flashed open. ‘Wait, you—really?’

‘Where else did you think this was going, Will?’

They were both laughing now: at Will’s reddening face, at the rings Hannibal had forgotten in his coat, at Amelie’s frown and kick from a dream.

‘I didn’t know where you were going with it—I don’t know.’

‘But will you?’

‘Yes, yes, if you want.’ Self-conscious, he laughed and rubbed at his face. ‘Whatever you want.’

It was whatever Hannibal wanted the following Saturday, too, when they dropped Amelie off at Margot’s and, without telling her anything of it, went to get married. No witnesses were present, no photographers, no one except the clerk and the two of them. They signed on the dotted lines with Hannibal’s pen, they exchanged Hannibal’s rings, they revelled in the strange secrecy and urgency of what they’d done and the way they’d done it: as though it were forbidden. Hannibal could not stop looking at him, in the courthouse and in the street, his Will nervous then elated, then calling Margot to ask if Amelie could stay a little longer because, oh, they’d just got married.

Will let Hannibal dress him that day, he let Hannibal take him shopping for extravagant gifts, he let Hannibal bring him back home and feed him and fuck him, and all this with not one word of criticism or complaint. Bare and panting, he lay on Hannibal’s side of the bed, alabaster skin blushed red and stark against the virgin-white sheets, legs apart, neck elongated, hiding nothing of his body now, and he laughed at some sweet word Hannibal had said. He trusted him so, wondered Hannibal, he loved him so—how easy he would be to kill, easier even that Hannibal had anticipated. He would barely need to be coerced; apply the correct pressure, and he would follow Hannibal into slaughter.

Only he didn’t love Hannibal. Only what he thought Hannibal to be.

Keeping secrets from Will had only ever been a thrill: the thrill one gets from winning an advantage over an impossible opponent.

Now, on the first day of their marriage, something else snuck in.

Chapter End Notes

Doctor Lecter's quick life hack: couple counselling can be pricy and time-intensive. Channelling your resentment into fantasising about brutally murdering your partner is free, and can easily be combined with other activities, like cooking, cleaning, or buying wedding rings!

Did you guess right? ;)

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

> *She thought about the girl in the drawing, the not-Amelie, folded into the pocket of her dress even now. She had stared at her over several evenings, trying to read the truth in her uncanny features. She'd imagined the girl had been real and Amelie merely a copy, poorly rendered over old carbon paper. She'd imagined there had been other girls, drawn and erased, until the final version of Amelie had come off the page and into life, like if Pygmalion had abandoned sculpture and turned to the pencil.*

Chapter Notes

> A warning here, I guess, for a child having a very bad time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Twelve.
One week before the Christmas Eve party.

Amelie dropped the shopping bags on the bench and slipped in next to them. Tėtis gestured at her to give him her coat, and she nearly sent one of the bags flying trying to wrench it off. The heating inside the coffee shop was working full-force; the window by which they'd found the perfect table had steamed over, and from this vantage point, the passers-by stepping around snow puddles in the street looked severely overdressed.

The bags held various treasure: produce to add to their stores in anticipation of the Christmas Eve party, perfume bought as gifts for Tėtis's friends, art supplies to keep them entertained over winter break. Amelie's favourite bag held her new pocket square and ascot, which they'd chosen today to best complement her suit. Ever since she'd declared she wanted to wear a suit at the party this year, they had been on the hunt for the perfect cut, but none of the models on offer had impressed them. It was true what Tėtis said, that what limited offer of formal suits existed for preteen girls was woefully unimaginative. They had eventually decided to go to DC and order one custom-made from Tėtis's preferred tailor; they'd come here today for final adjustments before it was complete.

Amelie let Tėtis choose the cut and the accessories, but she'd chosen the main thing about the suit, which was the colours: beautiful swirls of red currant and goldenrod, luscious and bizarre, as though the whole of it were a Hieronymus Bosch painting. She'd wear it with an eggshell shirt that would feel silky and cool against her skin, and she'd convinced Tėtis to get a cut of the suit's fabric for a tie so they'd match.

She tried not to think of what Will would say at the idea of ordering her a custom-made suit. In any case, Will wasn't here, nor was he invited to the Christmas Eve party, which rendered any opinion he might hold wholly irrelevant.

The waitress arrived with their order. Before setting the *café au lait* in front of Amelie, she eyed her suspiciously, then laughed.

'Got the order mixed up, did I?'

'No,' said Amelie. 'That's mine. He's having the espresso.'

'Aren't you a little young for coffee, kid?'

Amelie froze in shocked offence. She looked to Tėtis for help, but he offered none.

'How about I bring you a hot chocolate? Or a soda? You really shouldn't be letting her have caffeine so young, you know.'

'You really shouldn't be telling people how to raise their own children,' said Amelie.

'Amelie,' Tėtis chastised. 'Your concern is appreciated—Emma. And thank you for the coffee. If you could set it down here.'

Emma was not happy with it, but his tone brooked no argument. She threw one last disapproving glance at them before she walked off, at which point Amelie made a face at her back, embarrassed and hating herself for feeling so. Tėtis was making a note of something in his journal, but he raised his head to catch her, and frowned before looking back down.

'You have your coffee now,' he said. 'No need to be rude.'

'*She* was rude,' Amelie complained.

'So were you.'

Amelie kicked at the leg of his chair, frustrated beyond belief, and even more so when he did not react. Whatever he was writing was apparently more interesting than she. It was impossible to decipher the tight cursive upside down, but she thought she saw something that looked like a name and an address.

'You must learn to pick your battles, Amelie.'

'I won't,' Amelie swore. 'Put *that* in your diary.'

Tėtis smiled. 'I just might,' he said. 'Drink your coffee.'

Amelie drank. Tired from the trip, she sagged a little over the table, and watched numbly the bustle of patrons. She should have been spending this weekend at Wolf Trap, but Tėtis had said Will wasn't feeling well. She had the sense it wasn't real unwell, only pretend unwell, from the tone Tėtis had used and the way Will had sounded on the phone, but she hoped

secretly that it was real, and physical, and debilitating, and that he would die from it in the night with no one to fetch him water or call for an ambulance.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted a girl in a pretty scarf, books and notes arranged on the table before her. She seemed at first a normal sight, a student working on an essay, maybe, but something about her stuck out to Amelie. A moment of looking, and she had it.

She prodded Tėtis with her foot. ‘That’s Abigail Hobbs,’ she said. ‘Look.’

He looked briefly. ‘So it is. Should we go say hello?’

They didn’t really know Abigail Hobbs. They had never even met her. Once, Amelie had been so jealous of her that it burned. Now, her feelings were complicated by awe, which she’d felt ever since she and Tėtis had read Abigail’s autobiography over the holiday in France.

Amelie bit her lip, hesitating.

‘It will be rude if we don’t,’ she decided.

Wednesday night, Abigail Hobbs came to dinner. She had covered her neck, which was a shame: Amelie would have wanted to catch a glimpse of the famous scar. When they sat opposite each other at the table, Amelie felt acutely how much smaller she was, that her body didn’t sit with the same ease as Abigail’s did, that her eyes weren’t as blue or her precision with the knife as refined. She burned fiercely then with equal parts admiration and hatred, and wished to stop Tėtis talking to her so she could have her all to herself.

There was the usual exchange of compliments on the food—Amelie took no part because she’d told Tėtis she didn’t want game, and he’d ignored her—before conversation set in, and this revolved around idle things for a short time only. Then Abigail said,

‘This is weird.’

‘It doesn’t have to be,’ said Tėtis. ‘Will failed to introduce us properly, but we are hardly strangers.’

‘It’s just—well, you’re not together anymore.’

‘Divorce is a legal construct, prone to abstraction as all human-made laws are. In practice, our lives remain intertwined, for better or for worse.’

‘You don’t believe in divorce, but you’re getting a divorce.’

Tėtis raised his glass. ‘To the irony,’ he toasted. Abigail mirrored him promptly. Her hold on the stem made Amelie think she didn’t have much experience drinking wine. Amelie’s own cranberry juice had a bitter aftertaste to it. She ate some beetroot to chase it down.

Abigail cleared her throat. ‘You and the Ripper would agree on that one. About divorce, I mean. Did Will tell you that—’

‘That his lover’s husband has been murdered and castrated? Yes.’

Abigail flinched. ‘I didn’t mean to—I know this isn’t dinner conversation. I don’t think. I don’t come to a lot of dinners. I just thought that, maybe, if you’re fighting—and you should know about this—’

‘If you’ve accepted this invitation because you wanted to warn me, I’m flattered, Abigail. But I hope you will find some other reason to stay, now that you see it is not necessary. Will and I may not be on the best of terms, but he does let me know sometimes about his killers.’

‘Okay. Good.’

‘I know about castration,’ Amelie interrupted, because she felt that Abigail had glanced at her when she’d apologised earlier, and she could not stand to be viewed as the reason they couldn’t discuss an adult topic at the table. ‘And the victim wasn’t castrated, he was emasculated. When you’re castrated, they only cut off your testicles, not your penis.’

‘Oh,’ said Abigail. She wouldn’t look at Amelie still. Amelie thought she might have been one of those people who didn’t know what to do with children, and this was especially offensive because Amelie considered herself to be a particularly mature and approachable child.

‘Amelie keeps herself well-informed.’ Tėtis smiled. ‘It is an unfortunate necessity considering who her father is. You should feel free to speak about whatever you wish to speak about at this table, Abigail.’

‘Like the mediaeval philosopher after he had a baby with his lover,’ Amelie pressed on to further prove herself. ‘He was castrated. But I don’t remember his name just now.’

‘His name was Peter Abelard,’ Tėtis confirmed. ‘He was a twelfth century scholar who postulated an avantgarde world of reason—before he fell prey to love and lost it all. He never blamed those who’d castrated him. He had a revolutionary view on justice that lay ground for our modern understanding of the law.’

‘I *know,*’ Amelie huffed.

‘I know you do, Amelie, but Abigail might not know.’

Amelie stared at her plate. She had wanted to impress Abigail, not make her feel stupid. She wished desperately she knew how to show off without seeming arrogant, or how to be charming in conversations with university students.

‘Amelie and I visited a monastery in France where he stayed for a time,’ Tėtis continued as she stewed. ‘We learned that Abelard believed it isn’t merely a man’s actions that should be judged, but the intent behind them. If our sin is born of love, we are innocent.’

Abigail frowned. ‘I don’t know if I agree with that. It’s the action that matters fist, isn’t it? Intent is interesting to think about, but it’s philosophical. Prone to abstraction, like you said. In practice, it’s always—uhm—secondary to consequence.’

‘Spoken like Will’s student already.’

Abigail smiled at the praise with the graciousness Amelie wanted for herself. She wondered if the only way to get it was to have her father try and slit her throat, and if in this case it was worth it.

‘It is this very abstract that makes your book compelling, isn’t it?’ Tėtis cut into his rabbit. It spilled a bit of juice on the plate. It pooled like blood. ‘The question at the heart of your story is whether we can forgive your father the crimes he committed because of his intent: because he committed them in the name of his love for you.’

Abigail winced. Amelie looked up sharply at Tėtis to chastise him, but he met her gaze steadily before blinking and turning to Abigail.

‘I don’t know that’s the main question.’

‘What is?’

Abigail said nothing. Amelie wished she knew what the main question was so she could help her.

‘Your father did not try to kill you until circumstances forced his hand. He was finding ways to stop himself from doing that very thing. He valued your life over the lives of all the other girls in the world.’ Tėtis caught Amelie’s eye again and smiled, perhaps to compel her to join him and lighten the mood. She frowned back. ‘He may not have been without sin, Abigail, but he was certainly not without love.’

The statement sat in the silence for a moment, setting into shape.

‘That is my interpretation, of course,’ Tėtis broke the tension. ‘It is always the reader’s pleasure to interpret as he sees fit.’

Abigail’s shoulders relaxed by a fraction. She took a swig of wine. ‘I think book club discussions are more fun for the readers than they are for the characters.’

‘But we are all here characters. Miss Lounds mentions me twice, both times to theorise whether or not I will eventually end up shot dead in my own kitchen. Fortunately, Amelie manages to avoid any gruesome fate, even in the hypothetical.’

This had offended Amelie when she’d first read the book, and the offense returned now in double force. She felt left out of the conversational bracket, like a spare cog in a piece of complicated machinery.

‘There was a bit about her, too, but I knew Will would want it taken out,’ Abigail admitted. ‘So I had Freddie take it out.’

‘But not the bit about my violent death.’

‘Well—by then, you were getting divorced.’

Tėtis smiled his full smile at her, which Amelie resented, and for once not out of jealousy. There was just nothing funny about it, *nothing*—she could not understand how he could be so blind as not to see it.

After Abigail left, Amelie became woozy. She had been meant to help clean up, but the pressure in her head made her wander away. She ended up in Tėtis’s study, where it was dark and appropriately serious, and she dropped on the sofa, and lay there, and thought about adult things like love and castration.

She was rarely in the study alone, but it had never before stopped her from thinking of it as *her* study, just as this had always been *her* house, her sofa, her darkness. This had changed now. She had the sense of the study smelling different, even, as though she were an animal and another had encroached upon her territory. Well—she *was* an animal. Was she encroaching?

Because the things that had seemed to Amelie decidedly hers were no longer so. The study belonged to a man who happened to be Amelie’s father, but who had been something else before; and Will wasn’t hers anymore but Jack Crawford’s and Abigail’s and his lover’s, and, maybe, the Chesapeake Ripper’s.

She was so sleepy. In the sleepiness, the black of eyelids swirled and shaped. She thought about the girl in the drawing, the not-Amelie, folded into the pocket of her dress even now. She had stared at her over several evenings, trying to read the truth in her uncanny features. She’d imagined the girl had been real and Amelie merely a copy, poorly rendered over old carbon paper. She’d imagined there had been other girls, drawn and erased, until the final version of Amelie had come off the page and into life, like if Pygmalion had abandoned sculpture and turned to the pencil.

It did not feel right to make up such elaborate lies. Amelie understood the drawing was not hers, and neither was the story behind it. Tėtis could draw uncanny nightmare girls if he wanted to. Telling him he couldn’t was mean, ill-intentioned, the sort of thing, she thought viciously, Will might do, because Will hated Tėtis and had always treated him poorly. Amelie did not want to be like Will.

She slipped off the sofa and went to the bookcase. She found the sketchbook again. She would replace the page, creased and finger-stained though it was, and no one need ever know. If Tėtis noticed it had been torn out, Amelie could always say Tommy had done it.

The sketchbook opened on a new drawing.

This was no uncanny girl. It was Amelie. Her back was pressed against Will’s chest, who had hunched beside her as though to show her something, only his arms were not gesturing but pressed tight to hers—keeping her elbows locked—the fabric of her dress was wrinkling,

folding, curling under the press of muscle—and in his hand was a knife. The edge bit into her neck. The blood was staining the dress.

‘Amelie?’

Amelie shoved the sketchbook back onto the shelf. She hid her nightmare girl drawing back in the pocket of her clean dress, and she tried to imagine what it felt like to lose so much blood—did Abigail say, in her book? She forgot—maybe it was much like now, with her heart beating wildly but her mind slipping away into black.

She swayed on her feet. Here were the black dots you got sometimes when you did a handstand. She thought she was falling for a moment before Tėtis’s hands eased her straight.

‘I’m drunk,’ she told him, because she felt somewhere between what she imagined death and drunkenness to feel like.

‘That is because you have barely eaten.’ Tėtis was lifting her up, she realised through the blackness. ‘Too much cranberry juice on an empty stomach.’

Amelie blinked. They were in her bedroom now. The lamp beside her bed had turned on, and it cast a warm glow over Amelie’s pillow. A bit of saliva had dripped on it, she noticed, and she thought about rubbing it off, but her arms were too tired. She gave a noise of complaint. Tėtis wiped it off for her.

‘Because I don’t like rabbit,’ she remembered. ‘I told you because I wanted to have chicken, or duck at least.’

‘You can have that tomorrow,’ came the promise. ‘Tonight was about Abigail. We have to accommodate our guests first, don’t we?’

‘No, because—’ Amelie yawned. ‘Because you didn’t do rabbit because of Abigail. It’s just because you thought it was funny. Well, it wasn’t.’

‘No?’

‘This is why I drink,’ Amelie said through another yawn, and Tėtis laughed.

And his laugh became changed and dim, as though he were laughing from a great distance, and Amelie wondered if she was Pygmalion’s girl after all, slipping back into her drawing.

Light woke her, bright and hateful. The house cooled at night and the floors were always unpleasant in the mornings, but Amelie found herself kicking off the sheets, blushed with heat. Her armpits and legs felt sticky and wet. Her head pulsed.

There was a glass of water by her bedside, but she did not want it. She was not going to rest until she’d had blood orange and grapefruit juice, freshly squeezed and garnished with mint, and so she fell from the bed on the cool floor and went to look for Tėtis, having found her throat too morning-raw to shout.

On the way to the staircase, windows had drawn themselves mirror-images in white. This was too much sun for a Thursday morning in winter. Amelie became concerned she had overslept heavily, and more so that Tėtis had not woken her like he was supposed to. What had he been thinking?

She heard the door downstairs clicking open, and Tėtis's voice—and she was opening her mouth to tell him off for going out and forgetting about her—

A heart-stopping shatter rang through the house. Something banged the wall. Something else fell. Something—Amelie stopped in her tracks, frozen, feeling like a rabbit.

'—leave her alone. Do you understand me? Does that—does that penetrate that thick skull of yours, that I won't just—I'm done letting your crawl all over me. I'm done letting you do whatever the fuck you want—'

Amelie crawled forward. The wooden floor was polished, so she didn't have to worry about getting a splinter. Her bare knees made barely any sound as they slid.

Another sound. Heavy breathing. Amelie reached the corner of the stairway and peered down.

By the front door, she saw the remnants of a vase. The coat hanger had tipped over. There was a crack in the table where Amelie always dropped her hat.

Tėtis was pressed against the wall. She could not see him very well, because Will's back and head were in the way, but she could see his eyes, black and blown—and they found their way over Will's shoulder to meet Amelie's gaze.

'Look at me!'

Amelie stood up. It got the floor creaking and shifting, and Will reared back to see.

He let Tėtis go.

'What are you doing here?' His voice shook so badly she could barely understand him. His face was pale, a little swollen, nasty with fever-sweat. 'Why aren't you at school?'

'A headache,' Tėtis said. 'Hopefully it will be gone by afternoon, and we can still make art club.'

'I—'

Maybe he really was ill, thought Amelie. There was a strange emptiness in his eyes, like he'd forgotten not just how to make sentences but how to think, and the smell wafting off him was hot and sickly sweet. His hands shook, and the rest of his body, and Amelie didn't want to watch it anymore. She wanted him to go and die somewhere else, somewhere she wouldn't have to look.

'I'm sorry,' he stammered, and then he turned and rushed out the door. He left it hanging open behind him. A little bit of snow fluttered in.

Tėtis closed the door.

‘How about some more sleep?’ he asked lightly. ‘It is still quite early. Or did you need something, Amelie?’

‘My juice,’ Amelie said blankly.

‘I will bring some up for you in a minute.’

Amelie went back to bed. She could hear her footsteps on the floor, the slide of the sheets, but all of it dimmed under the insistent hammer of her heart.

When he came, Tėtis helped her sit up before handing her the glass. Condensation had made it slippery, and she had to focus to tighten her grip. She drank and drank greedily, annoyed that while it was satisfying her thirst, she could barely feel the taste.

‘There was another Ripper murder in the night,’ said Tėtis softly. ‘Will came directly from the scene. It clearly upset him. He needed a place to spend his frustration.’

‘He said to leave someone alone,’ Amelie remembered.

‘He learned that Abigail was here for dinner. The girl that was killed looked very much like her. I can understand why Will felt protective.’

‘Do you think the Ripper wanted to kill Abigail?’ whispered Amelie. ‘To upset Will, like he did with that man? And he got the wrong person by accident?’

Tėtis stroked her cheek. His hand was warm, and she leaned into it. ‘I don’t think it was a mistake. The Ripper is clever: to kill Abgail would mean to cause grief, certainly, but by killing a look-alike he is telling Will he knows what she means to him, and that she is not safe. Unlike grief, anxiety only grows with time.’

‘I’m afraid to sleep,’ Amelie confessed.

‘Afraid of the Chesapeake Ripper?’

Amelie nodded, even though it wasn’t true.

Tėtis considered her for a beat, then stood.

She heard him moving around in his bedroom across the morning-silent hall.

She’d thought he’d gone to change his clothes, and that he would join her—he looked like he hadn’t got much sleep—but when he returned, he was dressed the same. He hunched by the bed, took Amelie’s empty glass, and pressed something else in her palm, just as cool and smooth to the touch.

‘What is it?’ Amelie asked, as though by pretending she didn’t know she could make it be something else.

Tėtis leaned in, so close she had to struggle to keep her eyes focused on his. He covered her hand with his own, hiding the thing from view.

‘Do you remember what I told Abigail last night, my sweetest Amelie?’ he murmured. Amelie shook her head. ‘Love is when you value one girl’s life over all the other girls in the world. And you must remember to love yourself first. Will you remember?’

‘I will remember,’ she whispered.

He kissed her forehead. *Sleep well,* he said. He did not close the door all the way behind him, like she had it most nights, but left it ajar, so she might hear the sounds drifting in from the kitchen and be soothed into dreams.

The knife did not feel cool anymore, but warm from the heat of her hand.

Chapter End Notes

You may take the vote on who the worst parent is!

Next time, it's six years ago and Hannibal invites Jack Crawford over for dinner. It's also the last breath before the present storyline picks up, and we won't have much time anymore to look back...

Six years before the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

> *'I have to say, though, Doctor, I was surprised that you invited me at all.' Jack paused to take a bite of the dessert and hum appreciatively. Hannibal would be glad to have him at his table again. 'The people who care about Will like to tell me I need to think about his family. I was worried this might be another intervention.'*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thirteen.
Six years before the Christmas Eve party.

'You're under arrest!'

Hannibal raised his hands, careful not to let any of the cream drip down the whisk. Dessert was near-ready for serving, prepared in advance to minimise Hannibal's time in the kitchen during dinner, and to ensure Will was not left to entertain Jack Crawford alone.

He was tempted, however, to linger. Amelie and Will had been playing in the kitchen to kill time before Jack's arrival and had left a battlefield behind. While Hannibal agreed that *Mystery Meal,* Amelie's original game show that saw blindfolded competitors fed various concoctions until they identified every ingredient, was a fine way to develop her palate, he would have preferred the producers had thought to include clean-up as part of the format. As it was, cubes of cucumber and radish littered the counter, as did strips of orange peel, ribbons of ham and teaspoons stained with various spreads. If Will had to make idle conversation with Jack Crawford for a quarter of an hour, perhaps that would be penance enough.

'Arrested on what charges?' he asked Amelie, who stood in the door of the kitchen with Jack Crawford's FBI badge displayed proudly in her hand.

'Huh?'

'What am I being accused of, agent?'

'Many crimes,' Amelie said. 'Murder, stealing, refusing to share, and *blastemy*.'

'Blasphemy. Offending God.'

'I know.' Amelie lifted her chin proudly. She had learnt by now how to lie, though not yet how to lie well. 'You have to come to prison with me now. It's in the dining room.'

‘May I finish plating this first? Or else I fear ruined dessert will be added to my list of charges.’

‘You may,’ Amelie agreed graciously, ‘but quickly. I don't like waiting, and neither does justice.’

In the dining room, Hannibal placed the panna cotta before Jack first. Amelie had carried in Will’s. When he praised her on the presentation, she preened, as though she’d been solely responsible for the meal as a whole.

‘Beautiful, Doctor,’ said Jack. ‘You’re playing with fire, here. I don’t know if I’m above using my position to secure another invitation, now I’ve tried your food.'

‘We will have to invite you again before you are forced to compromise your ethics.’

‘Can I play with your badge again next time?’

‘Sure you can.’

‘You can come tomorrow, then,’ Amelie decided. ‘But after five, because I’m going to the zoo with my class, and I might not be back before.’

‘I have to say, though, Doctor, I was surprised that you invited me at all.’ Jack paused to take a bite of the dessert and hum appreciatively. Hannibal would be glad to have him at his table again. ‘The people who care about Will like to tell me I need to think about his family. I was worried this might be another intervention.’

Hannibal could only imagine how persistent Alana had been. ‘No intervention,’ he assured. ‘I believe Will is perfectly able to decide what’s best for him.’

Will choked on his drink. Hannibal passed him a napkin to cough into.

‘Look, I’m the first to admit the job is a lot.’ Jack slapped Will on the back, which didn’t help. ‘And I know it’s harder for Will than it might be for someone else. But he’s damn good at it, so I need ways to soothe my conscience, don’t I? And it does help to know he has something good to come home to. Makes me sleep better.’

Hannibal smiled graciously, though privately he seethed. He did not want to be the good thing Will came home to.

It had started innocently enough. Several months previous, Jack Crawford had hounded Will down, and Will had become obsessed with the Minnesota Shrike. He’d spoken to Hannibal every day about the missing girls, he’d showed him the crime scene photos, he’d whispered into his ear things he imagined the Shrike to think or feel. Hannibal found this entertaining, and generally did not mind, even when Will’s distraction drove him to leave coffee mugs and crime scene photos in strange places around the house.

But after the Shrike fell to his death, Will did not stop like he’d promised. He answered Jack’s next call, and the one after, and meanwhile he grew reserved. He no longer told Hannibal of the killers he pursued. He hid case files from him. Hannibal and Amelie did not

need him to negotiate their relationship anymore, not like they had when Amelie was younger, and so Will was on the prowl for a new cause.

It was unspeakably insulting, and the only reason Hannibal had ever allowed it was that, after Hobbs, he had hoped the hunt might break Will out of his inertia and encourage him to pursue again the thrill of taking a life. He'd shot Hobbs: a disappointing, uninspired death, and Hannibal knew it would have only deepened his hunger—only he had overestimated Will's appetite for blood and underestimated his appetite for playing the saviour.

And while Will was off acting the hero, Hannibal was home every night tending to his child, who was too young to be left on her own. He could have spent those nights on his own hobby, too, but he did not. Neither did he complain. He was a man who put his marriage and his child first, as it should be, and in this way he was superior to Will, and in this way he was winning. But Hannibal had grown impatient with winning. If the game presented no challenge, what satisfaction was there in victory?

Once Jack had left and the table had been cleared, Will wandered into the kitchen, hands in pockets and a wary expression on his face. Hannibal imagined it came from having had to negotiate his fealties over dinner, and from knowing he'd been treading on thin ice for months, even if he did not completely understand why.

'That wasn't a complete disaster,' Will said lightly. 'Amelie is arresting the dog in the backyard.'

'Following in her father's footsteps. Maybe you would consider setting an example of cleaning up after play, too.'

'Sorry.' He didn't sound sorry. Hannibal contemplated the knife in his hands, which he'd just wiped clean. Jack's words were still ringing through his head. '*Mystery Meal* gets intense.'

Hannibal did not play *Mystery Meal* as a rule, so he could not relate.

'She fed me dog food today,' Will said. 'Dipped in wine. It wasn't as bad as you'd expect. You should get her to give you the recipe.'

Hannibal recognised this as placatory. Will had been punished for whatever slight he'd committed with a mouthful of dog food; the implied message being, Hannibal should get over himself.

He set the knife down in the block. Doctor Du Maurier had advised recently that, rather than playact equanimity, he should work on actioning his negative sentiment toward Will. This, she believed, would naturally lead to Will becoming more involved in the marriage, just as Hannibal wished him to be.

By actioning, Hannibal understood she'd meant something like refusing to clean up after *Mystery Meal,* or, potentially, instigating a shouting match. These were small, pedestrian things, however, hardly worth the bother, and incapable of relieving the magnitude of feeling which had built in Hannibal.

‘You are working the trombonist case,’ he said. ‘Yes?’

He saw Will tense immediately. ‘How do you know about that?’

‘My patient shared some information with me that might be pertinent to the case. It is probably nothing, but I thought you might wish to go and verify for yourself.’

He told Will about Tobias Budge.

Will hummed, nodded, listened. He looked up the music shop on his phone. He would go tomorrow and have a look on his way back from the dentist. Hannibal had booked him an appointment for an old filling.

‘Who’s the patient?’ Will asked, leaning against the counter at Hannibal’s side.

‘I am already in breach of doctor-patient confidentiality, Will.’

‘I don’t give a shit about doctor-patient confidentiality. Who is he? Now, Hannibal.’

Hannibal felt his fingers tighten on the kitchen cloth. He relaxed and straightened out the wrinkles. ‘His name is Franklyn Froidevaux,’ he said. ‘Would you like my full diagnosis and patient notes, too? They’re not very interesting.’

Will coloured. ‘No, no, just—don’t see him until this case is done. Alright? Just to be safe.’

‘I will be safe,’ promised Hannibal.

Hannibal did not believe in doing things which guaranteed a sure outcome.

When he took victims, he prepared his work station and his materials in advance, but he never settled on where the cut would be, on whether he would display a body, on how he would dress it or dispose of it, until inspiration struck in the moment. When he cooked, he would follow a recipe exactly until a whim took him, and he would add or substitute an ingredient to new effect. When he became a father, he had done it with no expectations of where it would lead, and when he’d asked Will to marry him, he hadn’t known whether he would enjoy being married.

In the case of Tobias Budge, Hannibal saw several possible futures, and he amused himself with flicking through them as though he were leafing through a picture book. Will might risk appearing bothersome and ask Jack Crawford for help, and capture Budge—this was unlikely. Will might go alone and kill Budge in self-defence—this would be preferable, because with every man he killed, Will would understand just a little better the thing about Hannibal that Hannibal could not tell him. Will might go alone and emerge injured, missing limbs or internal organs, and need to be nursed back to health for, potentially, the rest of their marriage—an acceptable substitute for the murder. Finally, Will might be killed—again unlikely, because Will was Will, and Tobias Budge was no one and nothing, but in any case—and Hannibal would know then if the fantasy of it matched the reality.

None of these futures came to pass.

Instead, the morning after *Hannibal* killed Tobias Budge and Franklyn Froidevaux, which had not been part of any possible plan, he found himself lying bruised and aching in bed, the various cuts he'd sustained burning and itching in turn, and struggling to think of what to do next. Will slept soundly next to him, apparently satisfied with the turnout, and naturally he would be: Hannibal might have expected him to be galled by the blood and the brutality, but of course this would be less important to Will than the sheer fact of Hannibal's apparent weakness. He had jumped to conclusions the moment his heavy gaze rested on Hannibal's flushed face, and some of the conclusions were correct. Others were not. This, at least, was Hannibal's advantage—that Will was too blinded by his own need to see the need in Hannibal.

Perhaps Doctor du Maurier was right. Hannibal had determined the positive emotions he might derive from each outcome of Will's confrontation with Budge—the capture, the killing, the maiming and the death—but he had wholly overlooked the negative. If he were his own patient, he might prescribe an exercise in listing and naming both these negative feelings going forward, in order to sensitise the patient to them; but when he took the prospect of Will's death and tried to follow his own advice, he found a thing in him that was too large, too sprawling—a thing without a name.

Will's breathing at his ear distracted his thoughts. He slipped from his arms and slid off the bed, satisfied when dizziness never came. He was recovering fast. Tobias Budge would not mark him for long.

Downstairs, he found Belle waiting by the door to the backyard, watching him expectantly. He let her out, then brewed coffee and made a start on breakfast. On the cutlery drawer, he found a glossy sticker of a shark, likely purchased during yesterday's zoo trip. It wouldn't come off when he pried at it with his fingernail, so he rifled through the cabinets until he located the solvent. If he confronted Amelie about the defilement, she would assure him with full certainty one of her toys had done it, or perhaps a school friend she had recently fallen out with; they'd had many such conversations before.

Will came downstairs at quarter to eight, shuffling his feet with the clear intent of announcing himself. Hannibal would have known him to be coming, regardless, from the horrible unnamed thing that rose in his chest, and he tensed without meaning to when Will came up behind and embraced him.

'Are you okay?' he whispered.

Hannibal told him *yes,* and Will did not believe him. He lay a kiss on the exposed nape of Hannibal's neck, he nosed at his hairline, he kept his hands flat and warm on Hannibal's hips. His care was sticky, sickeningly sweet, repulsively selfish and conceited, and Hannibal—

'I love you. You know?'

—Hannibal disappeared into it, Hannibal felt sick with wounded pride, Hannibal lost.

And once he did, he had an idea.

He would never rid Will of his protective instinct, frustrating as it was. He could not remake Will into the killer Hannibal would wish him to be, and this was disappointing. He could not kill him, either, which was perhaps most upsetting of all. But he *could* help Will find a useful outlet for his worst instincts that refocused his energies again on his family, as they should be.

It would require Hannibal to make considerable sacrifices with regards to his own needs and preferred ways of doing things. This was unavoidable.

Marriage, after all, was about compromise.

Chapter End Notes

So, my posting schedule was abandoned a little there... Here is my list of excuses: I was at Taylor Swift - I got covid - I went mountain hiking directly after having covid, which is never a good idea - my laptop started coming apart.

It is all good now, so I'll be posting the next chapter this weekend to make up for the break. A big turning point in the story is coming up, and I'm very excited for this next one!

The day of the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

> *The worst of it was that Will should have known all along. The worst of it was that he had no excuse, except that he'd needed to make Hannibal into what he'd wanted Hannibal to be.*
> *A doll to play house with. Just as Will had been to him.*

Chapter Notes

> I don't think this needs to be said anymore, but with this chapter I am compelled to restate the warning: a child is not having a good time here. Like, at all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fourteen.
The day of the Christmas Eve party.

The lights of the road sped past Will, streaming ribbons of red and orange. He was going home was his guess. He wasn't sure where he was going home *from*, but in a minute or two, his brain would fill in the gaps. He could never tell whether the memories that returned were real or manufactured, a mind's attempt to reason its way out of senselessness.

Oh—yes. There were Christmas presents in his trunk. A wallet and socks for Hannibal, relentlessly practical and the newest manoeuvre in Will's years-long crusade to introduce a kids-only Christmas gift policy. New ice-skates for Amelie, a wooden snail house Will had built and a set of paints to decorate it with, a jigsaw and a doll and five other things, which was excessive, even once it was divvied up between birthday presents and Christmas presents. Belle had died last week, though, and Will did not know how to make that better. Amelie had resisted all attempts at either diverting attention or talking through it.

When he arrived, there were strangers in the kitchen. He raced up the stairs to avoid them—last year, they had caught him and asked questions he could not answer about kitchen implements and where to put what—but regretted it as soon as he saw Hannibal's figure by the locked door to their daughter's room. He was dressed for entertaining, doing up the cuffs now; the dark suit disappeared into the corridor's dim until you could not tell him from shadow. Will understood his fair share of Lithuanian, but only with context, and absent of it he struggled to determine the exact content of the conversation. Still, from the urgent hush of Hannibal's voice and Amelie's determined shouting back, it was easy enough to decide he wanted no part in it.

He considered a strategic exit before Hannibal's eyes found his.

The last time their eyes met had been last night, when Will stopped washing the blood off Hannibal's hands to gaze back and forgot at once what he was meant to be doing. Hannibal's newest lapse was down in the basement now. The space had been meant for butchering and preparing the large meats Hannibal occasionally purchased. Now, it served a new purpose. It was easier when you had a place to store the body before deciding on how best to dispose of it; Hannibal had complained, as he always did when Will dared make any changes in the house, but eventually agreed this was reasonable.

When Will was leaving in the morning, Hannibal had been asleep still, worn out after the night they'd had. Will had been, too, and now after a full day at work it was worse. He would have feigned a migraine or food poisoning, if he thought for a moment Hannibal would allow him not to come down for the party.

'Take a shower before you get dressed,' Hannibal told him in Lithuanian, then caught himself and switched to English. 'You reek of formaldehyde.'

'Hello to you, too,' said Will. 'How was your day?'

Hannibal glared at him.

'You know that door doesn't actually lock.'

Hannibal turned the doorknob and edged the door open by a fraction. This was immediately met with a shriek from inside that would have been easily heard downstairs. It made Will's ears ring.

The scream only stopped when Hannibal pulled the door shut again.

Resigned to his fate, Will drew closer. He leaned against the door, close enough to Hannibal that he could see in the dark the way his face changed when the formaldehyde assaulted him.

'You think they've called child services on us yet?' Will whispered.

Hannibal smiled. Will saw the tension ease out of his shoulders, and he felt immediately a similar softening in himself. He had forgotten amidst it all that he hadn't cried for Belle properly, or mourned Hannibal's newest victim; he felt like he might like to do this now, only he didn't know how Hannibal would take it if both Will and Amelie decided to be useless tonight.

'Amelie demands I cancel the party. She refuses to dress.'

'How about you dress for a bit, sugar bug,' Will said through the door, 'and come down say hello to the guests? Then you can go back upstairs if you don't feel like it?'

The answering shriek was not encouraging.

'Amelie is of the opinion that we are not allowed to have the party without her.'

‘You’re not, because it’s *my* party, because it’s my birthday!’

‘It’s not your birthday party, though,’ said Will softly. ‘You had your birthday party last week, didn’t you? With all your friends? Tonight, Tėtis is having his friends over. We’re going to have candles for you because everyone will want to congratulate you, but tonight is about celebrating Christmas Eve.’

A stubborn silence answered him.

‘Look, why don’t you and I go see the cake, and make sure they’ve got seven candles ready? I know you still feel sad about Belle, and I do, too, but I think she’d want you to have a nice birthday, wouldn’t she? And for Tėtis to have a nice party?’

‘Noooo,’ wailed Amelie. ‘Belle will come back from the dead, and bite Tėtis in the throat, and then you can have a funeral party!’

Will could not decide whether this was grief, really, or mere stubbornness, and what to do about it should it be both. He was also privately worried that dealing with grief badly might be genetic.

‘That’s a little harsh,’ he murmured.

‘But imaginative,’ said Hannibal. ‘She is rehearsing the concept of death with new participants, giving context to her grief.’

He had a flash of a thought, odd and stupid, that recontextualising grief was exactly what Hannibal had wanted Will to do, too, by refocusing his energies on the dead man. But this was ridiculous: it would have required forethought on Hannibal’s part and cool-headedness, which were the very opposite of the profile Will had written up on him in his mind.

‘You know Tommy’s coming,’ Will said through the door. ‘The guests might think he’s the only one who’s celebrating a birthday today, if he’s the only one blowing the candles.’

There was a beat of silence. Then, the door opened. Amelie stood half-dressed on the other side, face red from crying and hair in disarray. Will felt decidedly victorious, and peered up at Hannibal smugly—

‘Will?’

Will blinked.

‘What?’

His lawyer sat opposite him. He was taking his glasses off to clean them, which was a sign he was about to say something he did not want to be saying. Winston was licking at Will’s bare knee—Will was wearing boxers, which he did not think he would have intended to wear for a meeting with his lawyer. Outside the window, it was morning—when did he get back? Last night? What time?—and snow revealed Wolf Trap all in stark white and black.

‘I had a client once who killed herself.’ Will’s lawyer had put the glasses back on his nose. ‘Halfway through the court proceedings. Waste of time for everyone and money, and we were so close to finalising the divorce. You can imagine the hours of therapy it took me to get over that.’

‘At least two,’ said Will absently.

‘Ha-ha. I’m not a shrink, Will. I’m not a doctor, I’m not your friend—I hate asking these questions. But I feel I need to. Are you taking care of yourself?’

‘Sure. It’s just—Christmas Day, you know. Tough day for divorcees and absent fathers everywhere. And, uh, flu season.’

‘Christmas is tomorrow, Will.’

‘Oh—right. What were we talking about? I got distracted.’

This was not good. He had got distracted by the past before, but never enough to mistake the date. He thought he should panic, only he couldn’t find it in himself to make that effort. He could be bothered to do very little ever since he’d found the dead girl that looked like Abigail Hobbs; ever since he’d gone to Baltimore to hurt Hannibal, or kill Hannibal, and found instead his daughter looking at him, seeing him for what he was.

The lawyer slid the file across to him. ‘Divorce papers, amended. Get them signed. I don’t care if it’s at gunpoint. I’m done with this.’

He had said this on occasion, but then he pitied Will too much to ever give up on him properly. Will went through the motions of nodding along. He folded the document and put it in the pocket of the coat he was wearing over the boxers. Had he slept in it again?

The lawyer left, and Will was alone.

He needed to sleep. Everything in Will screamed for sleep. He staggered up, stumbled to the stairway and climbed. His bed was downstairs, where he could see the door; but here was Amelie’s bedroom, the sheets sitting untouched, the toys gathering dust on the shelves Will had built for her. She wouldn’t like him to sleep here. She’d always been territorial, and now more than ever—but Will climbed into the bed, hugged the pillow to him and pretended he could smell her on the laundered fabric. Hannibal would have been able to.

It was dark now, and quiet. Hannibal was asleep next to him. The party had finished late, and it had been later still before they’d cleaned up and made their way to bed, and now Hannibal was a smudged, dead shape, pressed so close to Will that his own pillow sat empty. He often looked dead when he slept. Will blew on his face sometimes to see him react, just to make sure.

Will could not sleep. The restlessness in him had set in weeks ago, and he had thought he was missing Belle, or concerned about Amelie, or frightened of when Hannibal would lose control next—but he knew also it was none of those things. He turned again, huffing in

frustration. Amelie would be waking them up first thing, demanding presents and chocolate. Will might as well not bother trying to sleep anymore.

On tiptoes, he climbed down the stairs. The snow outside had laid a blanket over the neighbourhood, cushioning all sound. He got the key from the desk in the study, slipped into shoes and coat, and descended further into the mouth of the basement.

Cold seeped from the floor and the walls. The body lay flat on the butcher's counter, brushed with blood and bruised all over. Will had been too tired last night to do much more than drag it down here. He considered now what action to take: bury it in the woods, like he did with the last? Cut it into pieces and burn away the flesh, like he did with the one before?

This was the difficult part. This was the part Will agonised over. It would be alright after, but the first touch terrified Will, and he wished every time he didn't have to do it. He could do the clean-up, he could drive and dig, he could breathe in the smell of burning flesh and he could get blood from under fingernails—he could even cut, and rip, and maul, as long as he didn't have to be the one to touch the body first, to turn it from human to thing.

He forced himself to lay a hand on the corpse's thigh. He ran it up and down, past the nausea, past discomfort, past any sense of what was a right or wrong place to touch a stranger—because this was no longer a stranger, this was a slab of meat before Will, and it was only his brain and the tremble in his hands that needed to catch up.

And he felt a distended spot on the skin that should not have been there.

Struggling with the weight and the rigor mortis, he folded the knee, exposing the inner thigh. Right there, hidden neatly in the crease of the body, was a long incision, secured tightly with precise stitching.

Will's hands stopped trembling.

He took the scalpel. He drew it across the stomach. He pulled out the intestine, dropped it on the floor, uncaring of the mess, uncaring of the blood—and there was emptiness then, caving in Will and in the man's stomach: no liver, no kidneys, no spleen.

The worst of it was that Will should have known all along. The worst of it was that he had no excuse, except that he'd needed to make Hannibal into what he'd wanted Hannibal to be.

A doll to play house with. Just as Will had been to him.

He left the basement, not bothering to lock the door, not bothering to step around the pool of blood. On the stairs, he didn't fall. In the kitchen, he splashed water on his face and contemplated being sick, only what would that do?

'Daddy?'

He wrenched straight, shocked at the voice—none of it had been real, he realised, none of it except her.

'Sweetheart,' he said. 'What are you doing up?'

‘Because I heard Belle scratching to go out.’

She rubbed sleep from her eyes. Will stood there, everything in him shattering, and he saw Hannibal beneath the softness of her cheeks, in the slow-darkening shade of her hair, saw him through the childishness which she would one day shuck like an ill-fitting coat.

‘Did you wake Tėtis?’

She shook her head. When she came to Will, she lifted her arms to be picked up. Her head was bed-warm, nestled perfectly in the crook of Will’s neck.

‘Hey,’ Will managed. ‘Hey, listen, sugar bug. Listen—we’re going to take a trip. You and me. Come on—let’s get your shoes, but very quietly.’

‘But I’m sleepy.’

‘You can sleep in the car. Shh—it’ll be fun. We’ll find a pancake place for breakfast, how about that?’

She hummed a half-pleasure, too slow-witted with the hour to argue more. ‘Is Tėtis coming with us?’

Will forced down the thing in his throat. ‘No. We’ll let him sleep in a little, okay?’

‘Okay. But he’ll come later.’

‘Yeah,’ whispered Will, praying that it would be much later, hours if not days, or that Hannibal would not wake, would forget them, would find new dolls for his doll house, would find a new thing to play with—even when he knew it would not be so.

He knocked a second time. His hand looked bizarre to him momentarily, and it took him a beat to determine why: the last time he remembered seeing it, it had had a wedding band on.

There was a shuffling on the other side of the door. It drew open all the way, revealing the mediator, dressed for the outside. She was leaving.

‘Mr Graham—Will. What brings you here?’

Will blinked. ‘We don’t have a session today,’ he guessed. ‘Sorry about that. I won’t keep you. It’s, uh, Christmas—tomorrow, right?’

Concern and annoyance warred for dominion on her face.

‘Come in a minute.’ She sounded distinctly resigned. ‘No, please. I need you sitting down and warming up. You look ill—you haven’t been drinking, have you?’

Will shook his head. He didn’t think so.

‘Sit there. Take the blanket.’

She gave him the blanket, a coffee, the box of tissues off the table. Will swiped at his eyes, finding them sticky-wet with tears and yellow discharge. Maybe he was ill, like she said—only if that was the feeling in him, then he’d been ill for four years.

Out the window, it was fully dark. Will thought he saw a star in the distance, though it might have been a plane.

‘I wouldn’t judge you if you said you’d been drinking. Christmas is difficult.’

‘Sure. Doesn’t mean I need to make it difficult for you. Or is this billable?’

She sat on the sofa at his side. He saw her from a new angle now, closer than she’d ever come to him.

‘To be honest with you, I am not sure we will be continuing our sessions in the new year.’

‘Oh. Because of last time? Makes sense.’ Will drew the blanket tighter around himself. He felt cold through it, and through the coat. ‘I wasn’t really going to hurt him in here. I do have a little bit of self-control left, you know.’

She ignored the lie, and said instead, ‘Not because of last time.’

‘Why, then?’

‘Because I have worked with many couples, and I know how to tell the difference between a couple who’s coming here because they want to get divorced, and the other kind. The other kind is a waste of my time.’

‘We *are* getting divorced,’ Will reminded her.

‘Yes. But that is not why you come here.’ She fixed him with a look, sharp and clear. She smiled. ‘You think very little of me, Will, if you think I don’t know why *he* is here. He keeps coming because he wants to torture you. And you keep coming to let him.’

Will shut his eyes. ‘To let him torture me? Why would I do that?’

‘We know what the opposite of love is, don’t we?’

Will snorted. He took another tissue.

‘You should go to the hospital, Will.’

‘I’m fine. It’s probably the flu.’

‘I think you enjoy your body feeling like you feel,’ she mused. ‘Do you want to turn yourself into a dying man because it feels like you’re dying?’

Will breathed. ‘Maybe.’

‘Maybe don’t.’

‘Okay,’ he laughed. ‘You can charge double for this one. Send Hannibal the bill.’

She walked him to his car, gracious enough not to ask why he had so much trouble finding it. When the engine geared up, the idea of a hospital did cross Will’s mind—but the wrongness in him, whatever form it had assumed, had begun four years ago, had begun in his failure, and would not be helped if he did not first rectify his mistake.

The mistake was this: that Will had stayed.

The divorce was a sham, appropriately, like the marriage had been. Will had stayed where it mattered: he had withstood Hannibal’s cruelty, Hannibal’s pettiness, the threat that Hannibal had hung up like a shroud over Will’s life and all the lives Will held dear—and he had told himself then that he’d stayed for Amelie. He’d told himself it was the only fair way, that he’d only ever been playacting the role of father in Hannibal’s game, that the pretence would soon tear loose and he’d be revealed not half the father the Chesapeake Ripper had been—and what greater indignity could he suffer?

He pulled over in the middle of the road, half-obstructing traffic. In the driveway was Jack’s car, and another Will didn’t know. Every light in the house was on. It looked surreal from the outside-in, blanketed with snow, swelled with music and chatter. In a downstairs window, Will spied a woman in lustrous blue, someone new he didn’t recognise. Would she have heard of Will at all? Or did she think she was in the home of a widower who’d lost a spouse tragically, fated never to speak their name again?

In one of the upstairs windows was Amelie.

She was dressed to entertain, in a rich suit and a golden cravat, her hair loose for once down her shoulders, arranged by careful hands. She was searching for something in her desk, a hairpin, perhaps, or another accessory—in a moment, she would get frustrated and call out to Hannibal.

Will balled up a fistful of snow and threw it at the window.

She startled. Their eyes met through the glass.

Will canted his chin sharply, beckoning.

She’d slipped into winter boots before stepping out, but she appeared coat-less, arms drawn around her chest to keep the warmth in.

She started to ask. Will said,

‘Get in the car. We’re going for a drive.’

‘But the party’s starting. And it’s not your night, anyway.’

‘I don’t care. I need you to come with me. Alright?’

She shook her head. He had seen it, how Hannibal had moulded her from child into girl, from Will's baby into Tėtis's little soldier, and he had let it happen because he'd thought he had no choice—because he was protecting her from the truth, from the fallout should either of them be caught, from Hannibal and from himself—because she was Hannibal's daughter—only that had never been why.

You keep coming to let him.

'Get in the car,' he ordered. 'Now.'

And because she was a little girl, she did; and Will saw her desperately fighting down the tears of indignity and fear, and he hated himself so, hated himself more than Amelie hated him.

They'd left Baltimore city limits by the time Amelie recovered her voice. Even so, it came weak, sounding younger than she was—

'I want to go home.'

'Not right now.'

'I'm hungry!'

'I told you we'd find a pancake place for breakfast, didn't I, sugar bug?'

Dawn had broken, and Amelie was apparently done with sleep. Her face was scrunched up, tears rolling freely down the cheeks, her little legs kicking out continually, the feet driving their anger into the back of Will's seat.

'I want pancakes with apple and cream and cinnamon, like at home! Not like in a restaurant!'

Will didn't understand it. They had taken day trips before without Hannibal, and she had never missed him. She missed him rarely, as a rule, and missed Will constantly, complaining loudly when he came home from work, too sullen to kiss him goodbye in the morning—

'I'll make you some,' he promised. 'Okay? Look, we'll drive a couple more hours, and then we'll find a place to stop for the night, and I'll make you—'

'But I don't want to sleep in a strange house!'

'You'll like it. We'll watch TV as long as you want, and I'll make you pancakes with apple and cream the way you like—'

'No! I want Tėtis to make them!'

'Enough!' Will said—shouted—screamed—his fingers white on the wheel, his resolve hanging on by a thread, wanting Hannibal to make pancakes, wanting apple and cinnamon and cream, wanting anything but this humiliation, this emptiness left behind, this caving nothing that remained of the last eight years of his life, of the lie, the game, the naïve fucking desperate stupidity—

Jack was calling.

‘Are you going to pick up?’ said eleven-year-old Amelie from the backseat. She hadn’t wanted to sit next to Will. She wasn’t wailing anymore—she hadn’t, Will remembered, not since last time—only sitting quiet and withdrawn, looking out of the window at the passing cars.

‘No,’ Will said.

He could see what had happened well enough. Someone must have seen them leaving together, or seen at least Will through the window. Once Amelie had been determined missing, two and two would have been put together. Jack would have drawn Hannibal aside, there would have been a hushed exchange, a decision would have been made that he’d make a quiet exit and pursue—just in case, of course, never to suggest Will would do anything foolish, but then Will was a fool, and he’d been ill and odd lately—

He stomped on the gas pedal. He overtook two cars. He wasn’t going to let Hannibal catch them. Not this time.

Last time, he caught up to them in a hotel just across state lines.

It was a mid-range sort of place, with the musty smell of carpeted floors and no mini-bar, but fresh towels and complimentary conditioner in the bathroom. There was an ensuite kitchen, where Will made the pancakes. Amelie ate half with a pained expression before announcing they were wrong, despite Will following Hannibal’s recipe to the dot.

She’d been watching cartoons on TV for an hour, the sun dipping into evening, by the time Will saw Hannibal crossing the parking lot.

And he was standing in the door. The cartoons were forgotten as Amelie threw himself at him, was lifted and embraced until she squeaked, and in indignant Lithuanian she was telling him the story of her bad day: how Will had forgotten the Christmas presents, how she’d been bored on the drive, how Will had shouted at her and made the pancakes wrong—

‘Don’t worry, Amelie,’ Hannibal said, and looked at Will, and there was such cold in his eyes that Will’s lungs stopped taking in air. ‘The presents are waiting at home, and better pancakes, too. Why don’t you go into the other room for a moment while I talk to Daddy?’

‘No.’

‘I’m afraid I have to insist.’

Hannibal closed the door behind her. There was a key in the lock. He turned it.

‘I have paid for the room,’ he said, his back to Will. ‘I would prefer you didn’t drive, so we will leave in my car and return for yours another day. I’ve already arranged it with reception. Help me with the dishes and then we should go. You’ve left a body to rot on the floor, and I didn’t get the chance to do anything about it.’

‘You can have the body,’ said Will. ‘There are still bits in you could rescue, and I know you don’t like wasting food. You can take the rest and hang it up on a Christmas tree for Jack Crawford, if you like.’

Hannibal turned. ‘You tried to take my child from me, Will. Is that something you think I would be willing to forgive?’

‘I don’t want your forgiveness. I want you gone. I want you to never have been here, I want to never have met you—I want you to have died in the snow with your sister—’

‘I strongly suggest you come back with me now, Will.’

‘Come back with you? Jesus—after what you did to me?’

‘What did I do, Will?’ A cruel smile split his face, and Will’s heart broke again. ‘Did I play the rabid animal, and give you your excuse?’

Will hit him.

There was blood on his knuckles. His hands pulsed with pain. His face, frozen in a rictus of fury, itched with numbness and tears. And under him, Hannibal did nothing: did not strike back, did not push Will, did not try to kill Will in turn.

And that was the problem—it had been then, and it still was now—that was the thing Will hated the most, the thing that made him sick at night from hatred and from longing. He had known Hannibal would come after them, he had wanted him to, because he’d wanted to see Hannibal hurt like Will hurt, bleed like Will bled. He wanted Hannibal to want to kill him for what he’d done, like Will wanted to do to him—because otherwise Will was the loser, Will was the plaything, Will was the naïve, lovesick fool.

‘Stop smiling,’ Will had demanded. ‘Stop.’

‘But it is amusing, Will, isn’t it? That you would condemn me a monster, and kill her father where she can hear? Is she going to help you dispose of my body after, Will, in the Vergers’ pig pen? Are you going to teach her how?’

She’d been banging on the locked door for a while now, crying desperately to be let out, and it had only fuelled Will’s anger. But now he stopped. He had to stop. He climbed off Hannibal, he fell backwards on the floor and crawled away, and then he buried his face in his hands and cried.

Bloodied and bruised, Hannibal watched him. He never cried that day, not when they spoke of arrangements after, not when Will exacted promises and threats, not when they found Amelie asleep on the floor, hands swollen from beating them against the door, and not when they were driving back to Baltimore together in heavy silence. He never cried, never struck Will, never even raised his voice—and Will hated him for it more than he’d hated him for the lies, for the pretence, for never being real.

Something Will realised then: Hannibal had come after them last time, but he had not come after them today.

This was wrong. Hannibal should have abandoned the party in Jack's stead, he should have got in the car, he should have hunted Will down like he'd done last time. He should never have been satisfied with sending an emissary, not when the worst Jack would do to Will was take him to emergency or pull him off duty until he got himself together.

Will glanced at the rearview. When he met his daughter's eye, he felt an odd, awful, inexplicable pang of fear.

And then she screamed,

'Deer!'

Will hit the brakes, swerving on instinct, not knowing where the deer was, or whether or not he'd hit it. He searched the dark, illuminated only by the front lights, the forest awing dark on either side—

The passenger door flew open, and Amelie jumped out of the car.

Whatever fear he'd felt at the thing he'd seen in her eyes was gone, replaced wholly by the simple terror of watching his child disappear into darkness. Will pulled over, stumbled out, his knees weak from shock and his body weary from having lived so long across two times, two worlds—

'Amelie!' he called out.

She was the deer now, light on her feet, jumping over fallen branches and gnarly roots, trained into it through games of chase. Will ran after her, hobbled by his eyes, which refused to see past the dark, by his weight, which broke the branches she left intact, by her advantage of surprise—but his legs were longer, his muscles better developed, his desperation honed into art.

Deeper into the forest they went, and deeper still, and then Will saw her look back, spotting him all too close, and she stumbled—

Will ran to catch her, too late to save her the scraped hands. With his help, she stood, rotten leaves clinging to her jacket, face stained with dirt as though she were a savage thing.

'Hey,' Will wheezed. 'Hey—come here. Come here, I'm sorry—'

He was kneeling on the forest floor, the wet mud cold and sticky, the loose snow falling softly on his hair and his face, melting immediately into cool tears.

She hesitated. Then, she walked into his embrace, allowed him to put his arms around her, and plunged the knife into his stomach.

Will tore open. Will stained their clothes with fresh blood, dark and rich. Will drew in a shocked breath and screamed, and fell on her, scrambling for purchase, burying her under his

useless body and under his scream.

Was this why Hannibal hadn't done it, he wondered? Back then, when Will had first run—had Hannibal been readying this worse fate for him, all this time?

She'd managed somehow to kick herself free of his body. He lay curled up now, watching the faint stars glimmering overhead through the bare crowns. Distantly, across the pain and the knowing, came to him the feeling of her shaking hands, palming at the pockets of his coat.

'Amelie,' he said, somehow, even though he was finally the dead man he'd wanted to be, and dead men did not speak. 'Call Hannibal. Call Tėtis, do you hear me?'

She was shaking her head. 'No, no—he'll be mad—'

He'll be mad that you've done it? Will felt a hysterical sort of laughter bubbling up in him. *Or mad that you got blood and dirt on your new clothes?*

'Call him. Okay, sugar bug? He'll know what to do. Tell me you'll call him.'

He rolled to his side, enough to get her in view again. Will's phone lay pressed to her ear. He could hear the soft beeping of connecting signal.

The black was spreading. Will swallowed to keep it at bay a moment longer, long enough to notice she wasn't crying.

'I like your suit,' he said.

'Hello?' said Amelie.

And everything was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Well.
Hope you enjoyed this, uh, intense chapter. Next time, we'll be picking up where we've left off!

The night after.

Chapter Summary

> *It was past midnight when Amelie got home. Nearly everything had been cleaned by the hired staff, but in the dining room, red circles of wine marked the table, the sugar organs lay melting from the heat of combined breaths, and the air was still suffused with the smell of perfume and spice.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fifteen.
The night after.

The lights were cold and unforgiving, revealing imperfections of skin and the sharp lines of skeletal structures. Amelie thought she could almost see through to her own bone, where it sat shallowly beneath the skin on her hand and wrist. Her fingernails wore crescent hats of brown blood. It matched the colours of her stained suit.

On the creaky plastic chair beside her sat Jack Crawford. He was crying. Amelie watched, fascinated, the fat tears rolling silently down his cheeks. She liked that he allowed them their time, never wiping them off until they teased at his chin.

Amelie turned the chocolate bar in her hands, angling it so that the silvery foil caught the light. A reflection played briefly over the ceiling. After the hospital staff had rushed Will into surgery, Jack had bought her the bar. She hadn't started on it yet. She liked having something to hold, like Jack was holding the bunched-up jacket he'd given Amelie earlier to press against Will's stomach. Anytime his hands fisted tighter on it, it gave off the tang of blood.

Amelie enjoyed watching people cry who didn't usually. It felt more special than anything, and it interested her to see if they would be dignified doing it, like Jack was, or wet and messy and childlike. Her first memory, in fact, was of the only time she'd seen Tėtis really cry. As with most early memories, it was sharp in places but hazy on context, and she couldn't even be sure how old she'd been, or interpret at all what had preceded the event. She knew only that Tėtis had been on the floor in the sitting room with his back pressed against the sofa, and that she had been on the rug, cooking a wooden block on a tiny porcelain pan. When she'd understood he was crying, she walked across the room to give the toys to him—the block, the pan, then a fork and a ceramic plate—thinking that perhaps he was sad because he was envious of them. When this didn't work, she felt frightened and went to find Will.

The next thing Amelie remembered was the view from under the harpsichord, where she'd crawled and hid among dust bunnies and stray dog hairs. She'd watched from this safe

distance as Will sat with Tėtis on the floor and spoke to him, very quietly, things Amelie thought at the time might have been in another language, like an opera show or a song on the radio, so little did she understand of them. After some time, which Amelie remembered as hours but was very likely less, Will called out to her to come out. She did, though she did not want to, and she sat in Tėtis's lap when Will pulled her there, though she squirmed unhappily and whined to be released. No one released her, so eventually she gave up. She remembered, even now, how wet and itchy her hair had been from tears. She remembered the press of Tėtis's chin into her scalp, how strange it had seemed to her, and the way he had gripped the block she'd given him in a white-knuckled hand.

She tore open the chocolate bar and broke it in half. She gave one piece to Jack Crawford. He ate it in two large bites.

'Do you have my knife?' Amelie asked, watching the knobs of her knees as she swiped her feet there and back on the floor.

'I can't give that back to you, kid. But it's safe with me, okay?'

She nodded. The blade was Damascus steel, zebra-like and miasmic, and the handle was wood and mother of pearl. She did not like Jack to have it.

'Where did you get the knife?'

Amelie shrugged. 'I found it.'

'At home?'

'Yes.'

'I'll give it back to your father, then. That okay?'

'Yes.' Amelie took a bite of her chocolate. It left a sickening sweetness on her tongue, and she swirled spit around for a good moment trying to flush it out. 'It was the Chesapeake Ripper that stabbed Will.'

She felt Jack's eyes on her, but he didn't speak, so she continued,

'We went in the forest looking for a deer that was hurt, and the Chesapeake Ripper came and stabbed Will. Then I cut him with my knife, and he ran away.'

'Okay,' Jack said. He'd wiped his face dry, but his voice was swelled with tears. He did not believe her.

'It's true,' Amelie insisted, annoyed that he would doubt her word. 'He ran away before I could call you, so that's why you didn't see anyone. I'm telling the truth.'

She wished that he were a child, and her size, so that she could leap across the empty chairs at him and tackle him to the ground until he believed her—or that she still had the knife.

Frustrated, she stood and dropped the rest of the chocolate bar in the bin. Just as she'd done so, the door to the waiting room flew open.

Amelie threw herself at him, quick, before she could change her mind. She locked her arms around his neck and her knees around his waist. Here, just under his chin, he smelled of fear, and it made Amelie more afraid than she'd ever been before, more, even, than in the forest, more than when she'd been seven years old, and Will had first tried to take her away.

'Is Daddy going to die?' she whispered.

'I don't know,' Tėtis said, and Amelie started to cry.

It was past midnight when Amelie got home. Nearly everything had been cleaned by the hired staff, but in the dining room, red circles of wine marked the table, the sugar organs lay melting from the heat of combined breaths, and the air was still suffused with the smell of perfume and spice. Amelie opened the door to the backyard to air it out. She felt suddenly very sad that she'd missed the party. She stood in the draught, hoping the winter cold might stop the tears.

Tommy drew in next to her. He hadn't come with Margot to pick Amelie up from the hospital, and when he'd opened the front door for them, Amelie had felt irrationally angry that he would play host for her in her own house. She hadn't spoken to him since.

'Why are you crying?' he asked.

'Because I missed the whole party. And I went and got this suit for nothing.'

'You only missed half the party. We had to finish early because Hannibal went to the hospital.'

'So? Half the party is still a party.'

Tommy picked up a sugar kidney off the table and gave it for her to lick. 'I asked Hannibal if I could eat them and he said no,' he reported. 'But now he doesn't need them anymore, so I guess we can.'

The kidney was all sugar and food colouring, with perhaps a hint of marzipan. Amelie was hungry, though, and ate half before she gave it back to Tommy to share.

Amelie had never bathed at two in the morning before. Tonight, she did.

Margot had put a salt in the water that smelled of lavender and coloured it purple—Amelie thought they'd probably bought it in France, but she couldn't remember anymore—and she had brought Amelie warm milk with cinnamon to sip on as she bathed. There was such a quiet at this time of night in the house, a greater quiet than Amelie had ever known before.

She slipped her head in the water periodically to hear the sound of blood rushing through her own body.

‘Amelie. Can I come in?’

‘Yes.’

Margot put a towel on the floor and sat there. It seemed wrong to sit on the bathroom floor looking like she did, still dressed and made-up for the party. Only her eyes were lined with tiredness. Amelie had always liked Margot’s eyes: they were very much the same as Amelie’s, and very beautiful.

‘Hannibal called,’ she said. ‘Will is out of surgery. It went well. He’s out of immediate danger now, but it’s difficult to tell what happens next. Apparently, he had a high fever when they brought him in, and he suffered a seizure on the surgical table. They think there is something else wrong—that he is very ill—but they can’t say yet what it is.’

‘Okay.’ Amelie swirled her hand through the water. ‘So is he going to die or not?’

‘I’m not sure. But he’s probably not going to die tonight.’

Amelie nodded. She thought of the look in Will’s eyes in the car, dark and empty, like he wasn’t there anymore. Wherever he’d gone, it had seemed far away, and not a place people easily came back from.

‘Amelie,’ Margot said. ‘It seems that Jack Crawford would like to deal with this whole thing quietly and privately, which is good for us. But he might still like to talk to you about it more. What did you tell him, so far?’

Amelie shrugged.

‘We all understand you were only defending yourself, flower. But if Agent Crawford asks you about the knife—’

‘I told him I stole it,’ Amelie said impatiently. ‘I’m not stupid.’

Margot relaxed. ‘Good girl.’

Inside the glasshouse was warmer than outside, though only marginally. Most of the snails had hidden among the leaves and locked themselves in their shells with a layer of thickened mucus to overwinter, but a few had woken to brave the temperatures and snack on the apple Amelie brought them.

Wrapped tight in her robe, she sat in the wicker chair and watched them eat. It was now nearly three in the morning. Tommy was already asleep in Amelie’s bed, curled up with a plush dog Amelie no longer played with, and Margot was in the kitchen, looking up seizures on the Internet. She’d told Amelie it would be best for her to get some sleep, too, but that she could stay up if she wanted and wait for Tėtis, or for dawn, or for whichever came first.

Amelie had never been awake at three in the morning before. She observed the thick dark of the skies, the empty orange glow of the street. This was neither today nor tomorrow, and in this in-between time, Amelie felt like there was no past and no future, only herself, sitting in the glasshouse, and the snails eating the apple.

The longest she'd ever stayed up before would have been one summer when she was nine. They had been in a small boat in the middle of a vast lake, she and Will—she didn't remember anymore where, or why—and you could hear the fish jumping in the dark water, and other strange sounds of the night. Will had caught a fish and given it for her to hold, big and slippery and invisible, and she'd hugged it to her tightly. Above them, there were stars, brighter than Amelie had seen before. One fell, then another, because it was the time for the summer meteor showers. As Will watched the stars, Amelie leaned over the side of the boat and let the fish slip quietly back into the lake.

'The wishes don't actually come true,' she had advised Will. She'd been very rational back then, more so than now. 'If they do, that's just coincidental.'

'The fish made a wish, and it just came true,' Will had said. 'How about that?'

Amelie stood up from the chair. Her feet were beginning to go numb from cold. She rifled through the dead leaves and loose ground until she found the snail she had rescued from Wolf Trap. The temperatures had dropped before the snail had had the chance to heal properly, so now Amelie didn't know if she was sleeping or dead. The shell had mostly closed over, but small cracks remained through which winter cold could have crept in.

She closed her fist around the snail. She would take her inside, she decided, and make for her a box filled with wet gauze and thick succulent leaves, and keep that box close to the radiator in her room, or maybe the fireplace downstairs.

'You're going to get a name anyway,' she told the snail. 'And you can keep it even if you die. But if you live, that will be better for you, because in spring we'll be doing snail races and other activities, and the prizes are things like cuttlebone and mango. And your name is Will now, okay?'

Amelie was no longer as rational as she had been at nine, and she thought that because it was three at night, and neither yesterday nor tomorrow, that perhaps the human Will would live if the snail did, and he would die if the snail died. The doctors and nurses were only decoration, and needles and stitches only stage props. The things of real importance were the wet gauze, she decided, a good cardboard box, and plenty of heat to entice the snail into life.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all your comments on the last chapter! I should get round to answering them this weekend. Thought I'd prioritise getting this chapter out, first ;)

Things are looking grim, and it's still the night after next time. Expect a confrontation...

Since this one was on the short side, and so is the next chapter, I'll try to get it out by the end of the weekend!

The night after.

Chapter Summary

> *‘Why her?’ he whispered. ‘Why couldn’t you do it yourself?’*
>
> *‘It was always going to be her. It was important for her to act on her feelings, Will. And why should I have involved myself? To see what you would do? That, I am no longer curious about.’*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sixteen.
The night after.

While Amelie prepared a new home for her snail, Will lay in a hospital bed, watching with blurry eyes as his husband and killer arranged his things around the room.

Will’s phone was plugged in to charge. His coat was straightened and hung off the back of a chair. The divorce settlement, which he’d been carrying in the pocket of his coat all this time, was taken out, pressed flat, then set next to Will’s wallet and house keys on the window-side table.

Will wasn’t in much pain yet, but the itchy numbness in his lower body presaged a turn for the worse. His brain felt twice the size it should have, pressing in against his skull. His tongue lay heavy in his mouth. He was not dead, he had to remind himself, only feeling like it, and wasn’t that a miracle?

‘Are you lucid?’ Hannibal asked. He had his back to Will, his hands on the table. He wore an elegant suit Will didn’t recognise—something newly purchased for the party, he thought.

‘Yeah,’ Will slurred. He had to focus not to accidentally bite down on his tongue. ‘Amelie?’

‘She’s gone home. I told you an hour ago.’

Fear shot through Will. ‘I can’t remember.’

‘You had a seizure while they were operating on you. It is natural to have trouble processing new information in the immediate aftermath.’

‘A seizure?’ Will tried to sit up. Immediately, pain gripped him, and would not let go for breathing. ‘Because—because—of the blood loss? That a thing? Or—medication?’

‘No. An underlying condition. It won’t have been the first. In fact, your erratic behaviour earlier may easily be explained as post-ictal psychosis. It can come on days after a seizure.’

‘I didn’t—’

‘You may not remember.’ Hannibal turned to face him now. He always looked tired in the night after a dinner party, but this was different: this was worn-out, drained, worse. In the low light, his face was mostly shadow. ‘This is what I told Jack Crawford, for the time being. I didn’t have time to decide on the details.’

‘You didn’t think you’d have to make up a story. I would be dead.’

‘I didn’t know you would be dead. I couldn’t know what she would do, though I was curious.’

‘What about what I would do, Hannibal? Did you know there was something wrong—did you know about the seizures? Did you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then what if I had—’ Will choked on the thought of it. He couldn’t breathe. ‘What if—play with my life, fine, but why the fuck would you play with hers?’

‘I never played with her life.’

‘I didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t—I’ve been feeling so off, this whole time, I didn’t know where I was, where I was going—like walking through a dream.’ Will pressed the back of his hand to his mouth, stifling the sob. ‘God, I could have—’

‘You could not.’

Will watched the screen of the heart monitor. He could hardly believe it was showing everything normal. In his mind, he was still on that forest floor, bleeding out into the fresh snow. He hated the confidence in Hannibal’s voice; Will could not be sure, even, where he was—he had never felt sure about anything in his life, he thought, not like Hannibal did.

‘Why her?’ he whispered. ‘Why couldn’t you do it yourself?’

‘It was always going to be her. It was important for her to act on her feelings, Will. And why should I have involved myself? To see what you would do? That, I am no longer curious about.’

‘It was important for her to act on *her* feelings?’ Will hefted himself up, biting his tongue through the pain, higher up the pillow until he could no more. ‘You made her afraid of me. You orchestrated for her to be home after I found that girl’s body—’

‘I only reminded her of what you’d done to me before, all on your own. Or did you think she couldn’t remember?’

‘You made her *hate* me,’ Will spat. ‘Whatever I did to you, Hannibal, I *never* did that—I never told her a thing to make her hate you—’

‘I didn’t make her hate you. You did that on your own. I really had very little work to do, Will, except to gift her the tools she needed to execute her will.’

‘You—’

‘No.’ Hannibal was towering over him now, so close to the bed Will could have touched him, white-faced and so very tired. The coldness in his eyes barely concealed the fury brewing underneath, and Will thought that if not for the coldness, he might have finished the job right here, with the pillow or the IV line, or with his own hands—

‘No,’ Hannibal repeated. ‘*You* did this. You tried to take her from me. You knew you were ill and still put her into your car, and still you took her. It is always the same hypocrisy with you, isn’t it, Will? It was the same with killing: you would only tolerate it if it was done exactly in the way and for the reasons you preferred. No—I was willing to recognise that your needs lay along the fault lines of righteousness and fealty, and I made significant compromises to satisfy those needs. *You* put me in a position where I was forced to be reckless and ugly, just so you could pretend to have the moral high ground. *You* brought Amelie into the world, *you* forced us into this situation—you *left me.*’

With barely contained violence, he tore a fountain pen from the inner pocket of his suit, stalked over to the table, and signed.

‘Wait,’ Will said. ‘Hannibal—’

He threw the papers in Will’s face. They fluttered down onto the hospital bed and the floor around it.

‘I wish you a quick convalescence,’ said Hannibal.

Will lay silently for a moment after the door shut behind him. He barely dared to breathe.

Then, he found the sheet that bore Hannibal’s signature, and picked it up. When he looked at it, he saw instead Hannibal’s face just before he’d turned and left, as it was in that brief moment their eyes met across the room, paper floating it the air around them, the moment stretching in the mind’s eye—his tightly pursed lips, his eyes glimmering with unshed tears, the finality of his hurt.

The ink smeared under Will’s thumb. In the end, it had been neither a life sentence nor a death sentence.

For all that it had cost him, Will was a free man.

Chapter End Notes

Will's lawyer will be happy, at least.
This one's short, but it needed to be, I think. A longer chapter is coming later this week, though, with lots of conversations, some angst and some fun!

Three days after the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

‘Don’t do that, Will.’

‘Don’t do what.’

‘Say goodbye to people. Give up.’

‘I’m not giving up. I’m just—being practical.’

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seventeen.
Three days after the Christmas Eve party.

Light pooled on the ceiling, a shimmer of reflected disruptions, of swirling snowflakes and creaking branches, of drivers parking their cars in the lot below. It was Will’s screen now, his first and last source of entertainment. Jack had brought him his laptop and his books, and Beverly, who’d called him from Seattle, had ordered a special delivery of earphones, toothbrush and warm slippers. But the letters on the page confused Will, the screen of the laptop was too bright, the music gave him a headache—and he was allowed neither food nor walking around, only lying and staring at the ceiling, waiting to be told about the thing that might kill him.

A nurse walked past Will’s room with a breakfast cart. She did not stop. The smell of charred eggs made Will gag, only there was nothing in his stomach that could have come out.

‘Will.’

‘Hey. Just wanted to ask about the dogs?’

‘They’re all good. I went to look in on them this morning.’

‘Did you find the—ah—’

‘I did, I did. In the freezer like you said. Listen, Will, I have a friend—Bella’s old friend—she knows a dogsitter. Someone good, trustworthy, right? I might give her a call later this week?’

‘Yeah. Didn’t mean to put you out. It’s just my neighbour usually—but he’s away for Christmas.’

‘You’re not putting me out. It’s nice to get away, take a walk. You won’t see it from there, but there’s a bit of snow, in the woods. I get to have a white Christmas. But you know how this job is. One day I’m here, next day I’m flying across the state. Right?’

‘Right.’

‘How are you? Huh?’

‘Good. I’m good.’

‘Yeah? They had to keep me in for tests once, overnight. I thought I was going to go crazy.’

‘Well. I’m already crazy. So.’

‘They got any ideas yet?’

‘Hard to say. The doctor’s given me a long list they’ll be ticking off. I think the idea is, they throw enough diseases at me, it’ll inure me. I’ll be relieved to hear whatever the real thing is.’

‘I put in for extended medical leave for you. So you take your time to get better. To think about what happens next.’

‘Are you suggesting I quit, Jack? Jesus. Relax. I’m not actually going to die. Don’t—don’t go having crises over this. I’ll be fine. And if I’m not—’

‘I’m not suggesting, Will. But these things, you bring them home. You do. It warps you, and if you’re not careful, it’ll warp the people around you. Family comes first, right? Listen to the widower.’

‘This wasn’t—it would have happened anyway, job or not. She—we’ve been having other issues. But, uh, yeah. I’ll think about it.’

‘Good. I’d better let you rest now. Take care, Will. You taking care?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’

Will slept shallowly, blinking at the light, wincing and shifting with faint, fast-fading dreams. A nurse came in to shutter the windows. The ceiling went pinstriped. Will counted the stripes, adding them up in twos, in threes, in fives.

Another nurse came in to take his temperature. Elevated but acceptable. They were giving him something for that, and it was working. Will eyed the IV bag with hostility: he could feel the cool of it entering his body. It made him feel sick.

‘I’m surprised.’

‘What, that I’m alive?’

‘I can’t recall the last time you called me. Five years ago?’

‘People take sides in a divorce. I know what your side is, Margot. I’m not trying to—I wouldn’t be doing this, usually.’

‘I imagine you wouldn’t.’

‘I need a favour.’

‘You’re not going to ask me how I am first? Your manners have not improved.’

‘I know how you are. Your daughter nearly killed a man two days ago. That’s got to be bringing up unpleasant memories. Forcing you to reconsider things you’ve been making yourself wilfully blind to.’

‘I suppose that is what I get for asking you how I am. What’s the favour?’

‘Could you take my dogs for a while? Jack’s been looking after them, but that’s not a long-term solution, and I don’t know how much longer—you know. You’ve got the space, and I’m sure someone there knows how to care for them. They’re not that different to horses. Bit less dumb, bit less likely to kill you.’

‘I wouldn’t be doing this, usually. But the kids could use the distraction.’

‘Is she there? She’s staying with you?’

‘Yes. She’s just outside. Do you want me to ask if she’d like to talk to you?’

‘No, no, she—she’s not going to.’

‘Probably not.’

‘Could you just tell me, uh—could you tell me what she’s doing? Describe it, for me?’

‘Well. I can see her through the window now. She’s wearing that green winter hat she has. Tommy’s with her. They’re talking, wandering around—I think they’re kicking dirt at each other. I think that’s the game. She hasn’t talked about it, you know. I’ve asked Tommy, and he says not to him, either. She seems normal, but it’s hard to tell. Will? You there?’

‘I’m here.’

‘Okay. Send me Jack Crawford’s number. I’ll call him and arrange to have them picked up.’

‘Thanks.’

‘And don’t wait five years to call me again. Just because I have a side doesn’t mean I’m not allowed to cross enemy lines occasionally.’

‘Yeah.’

‘And my son isn’t the enemy, either. It’s—God—it’s not right for you to cut him off like that, just because the two of you don’t know how to talk to each other. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

‘Yeah. I—I get it.’

Will slept deeply, suddenly, like he’d been pushed down off an edge. His mind plunged into forget, his body plunged into paralysis—when he woke again, he could not move and could not breathe, not until the soft beeping of the heart monitor reminded him that they had kept him alive.

It was past ten now. Morning would be over soon, finally, at last— He asked the nurse that came in to check on his catheter when the doctor might show. She said later. It was so non-specific Will wanted to scream, and it was not as though he wanted the doctor to come, either, if it was just to tell Will when he might be dying. Later, probably, like everything else.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi.’

‘—Will?’

‘Yeah. Sorry. That’s him. Look, uh, I’m just calling because—I was thinking if you had anything else for your application you wanted me to have a look over, I have time now.’

‘I’ve already submitted it.’

‘Good. Keeping fingers crossed then.’

‘Thanks. Hang on—yes, give me a minute!’

‘You have to go. It’s the holidays. Didn’t mean to hold you up.’

‘No, it’s fine. It’s just my mum, she’s—she gets in the spirit a bit too much. It’s stressful. How, um, how are your holidays?’

‘Good, fine. Pretty boring.’

‘Okay. You don’t sound so good, though. Like, hoarse, or something. Is everything okay? Just, you never call me.’

‘Everything’s fine. I have a cold. And I’m a divorcé at Christmas. I’m calling everyone I know to make it their problem. That’s all.’

‘Okay, well. I $_{\text{hope}}$ it’s helped. I do actually have to go now.’

‘Sure. It was good to hear your voice.’

‘Um—okay. Bye, Will.’

Will was looking at the ceiling again, his imagination’s screen and canvas. Sometimes, he played tic-tac-toe against an imaginary opponent on that blank, or did long division, or arranged species of fish into salt-water and sweet-water. This did not entertain him for long, but it served the higher purpose of verifying that his cognitive skills, though dulled by blood loss and medication, had not been ravaged by the illness. Will’s primary doctor was a neurologist. Will recognised what that meant.

A nurse came in to take his temperature. Elevated, she said, still. Will nodded, unhappy, feeling as though he’d disappointed her. When did she think they’d be able to tell Will anything? She didn’t know. There’d be more tests this afternoon. She left before he could ask how much they would hurt.

In absence of the medical team’s efforts, he began to test himself. He wiggled his toes, closed one eye but not the other, remembered dates and names from the past. He would tell his doctor, he thought, when she arrived at last, and damn all embarrassment: *look, doctor, I can still count to ten—I can roll my tongue—I remember where my father went to school—this is a mistake, I should not be here—*

Will was here.

‘Will?’

‘Yeah. Hi. Wasn’t sure you’d pick up.’

‘Why shouldn’t I pick up?’

‘I don’t know. We never talked about what happens in the after.’

‘After my husband is dead, you mean.’

‘That is what I mean. How was, uh—the funeral?’

‘Shit. Everyone who didn’t already know what happened found out what happened. It’s hard to grieve when all people want to talk about is serial killers.’

‘I’d rather talk about serial killers, too. Bit more cheery.’

‘You don’t—I mean, I don’t know how closely you’re involved with this right now. That agent—he told me not to call you about it, that you wouldn’t know anything. But do you know anything? If they’ve got any more leads, or—’

‘Jack Crawford. That’s the agent. And he lied. I am involved. Was involved. You have to—you have to contend with the thought that we are probably never going to find him. We’ve been looking for years and years. Eventually, he might make a mistake, but he’s made mistakes before. Doesn’t mean we’ll catch him. Or if we do, we might not be able to hold him long. It’s a shit thing to accept, but that’s the deal.’

‘I’ve had practice in accepting shit deals.’

‘Yeah.’

‘You said you were involved. I mean, that you were involved but not anymore. Why is that?’

‘I, uh—I’m sick.’

‘Christ, Will.’

‘I know. Sorry. Parroting. It’s—they don’t know what it is. But I’ve been having seizures, a fever, these horrible headaches, and—I haven’t been—I don’t really remember the last few weeks very well.’

‘It doesn’t sound good.’

‘No, it doesn’t. So, it’s one test after another now. I think I’m better, on whatever they gave me. Things for infection, swelling, uh, epilepsy. I feel clearer, I think.’

‘That’s a good sign. Right?’

‘Maybe. Might be a while before I know for sure. Some of the tests are out for now. I got stabbed.’

‘You what—you got stabbed? Will—who—’

‘It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter, that’s not going to kill me. It was—I, uh—’

‘Hey. Hey, Will. It’s okay. Right? You don’t have to talk about it right now.’

‘—Yeah. Okay. Ah—sorry. God.’

‘Will. Why did you call me?’

‘I’ve been calling people all morning.’

‘Don’t do that, Will.’

‘Don’t do what.’

‘Say goodbye to people. Give up.’

‘I’m not giving up. I’m just—being practical.’

‘Practical. Fuck that.’

‘Yeah. Goodbye, Molly.’

When the line disconnected, Will lay with the phone pressed to his chest for a while, blinking back the tears. His ceiling was blurry, swimming now. The IV line itched.

He wiped at his eyes, annoyed with the drama of it, and tried to clear his throat to budge the hoarseness that had set in. He had one more phone call to make, and he could *not* sound teary and defeated for it.

He dialled. The phone rang. A nurse walked by Will’s door. Hannibal’s recorded voice instructed Will to leave a message. Will hung up.

The contact details on the screen showed a picture of Amelie making a silly face. She had set up all his contacts this way, years and years ago, when her hair was still very fair, and her mouth missed several teeth.

Will left the phone on the mattress at his side. He tried to roll over and curl up, but it hurt his stomach too much. In the end, he only wrapped his arms around his own chest in a pathetic facsimile of an embrace, and he watched the light dancing on the ceiling, and then he slept.

‘Uh—h—hello?’

‘Yes, Will.’

‘Right. Hey. Why aren’t you picking up your phone?’

‘*You* are not picking up your phone. This is the third time I’m calling.’

‘Was asleep. Are you home?’

‘Did you want something?’

‘How—how’s Amelie?’

‘Fine. She’s staying with her brother for a while.’

‘Oh, yeah. I knew that. You have patients today?’

‘I am not seeing patients until after New Year’s.’

‘When’s that again?’

‘Thursday.’

‘Oh. When you see Amelie—if she asks—can you tell her I’m—I don’t know. They still don’t know what’s wrong with me. I think they’re doing a lumbar puncture later today.’

‘She is not going to want to come see you right now, Will.’

‘God, no. No, I didn’t—I know she won’t see me, I don’t want her to see me. Not like this, here. Not—no.’

‘I think that is best.’

‘Can *you* come? —Well?’

‘You are the most contrary person I have ever met, Will.’

‘In sickness and in health, Hannibal.’

‘I have signed your divorce papers as requested.’

‘Doesn’t count until they’re filed, and my lawyer has gone skiing. We’re legally married until New Year’s at least. That’s Thursday.’

‘I suggest you give your latest lover a call. She has experience holding a dying man’s hand.’

‘I don’t want you to hold my hand, I just want— Look. If I die tomorrow, that night was the last time we saw each other. I don’t want that. Okay?’

‘You will not die.’

‘You don’t know that. Unless… unless you do know that.’

‘I cannot foretell the future. I know it’s unlikely.’

‘Do you—do you know what’s wrong with me, Hannibal?’

‘Maybe.’

‘*Maybe*? What—did you do this to me? Or—’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘What, then?’

‘I believe you may be suffering from encephalitis. An inflammation of the brain. Considering your symptoms, it is possibly viral in origin, though I cannot be sure. I smelled it on you at the mediator’s office several weeks back. It is generally treatable.’

‘—God. Jesus fuck.’

‘Would you still like me to visit? Or was it only a dying plea?’

‘Were you ever going to tell me? I get that it helped you get what you wanted, but God—I could have driven us both off the road. Why the hell would you risk that?’

‘I don’t see how it was my responsibility to tell you. You were clearly feverish and in pain. I expected you would go see a doctor. I am not in the habit of scheduling medical appointments for my acquaintances, Will.’

‘Right, okay—’

‘If you’re in urgent need of someone to do so, please feel free to remarry, now that you are able to. Your new spouse is the person you want to tell about your lumbar puncture, too.’

‘Fine. Don’t come. Leave me the fuck alone.’

It was two in the afternoon. Will lay, wounded, relieved, trying in vain to quiet the thump of his injured heart.

Later, Hannibal woke him. He had taken off his hat, leaving his hair mussed and staticky, but had not removed the coat, indicating clearly that he was not staying.

‘Margot requested I brought you these,’ he said, placing the bag by the bed. ‘Clothes, toiletries, towels. I told her you would have made do, but I suppose you did kill her brother for her. It calls for some generosity.’

‘She thinks you killed him,’ said Will heavily, raising himself from sleep.

‘She thinks one of us killed him.’

‘Yeah. And she thinks it was probably you.’ With a shaking hand, Will grasped for the water glass. A little spilled down the sides. Hannibal did not help.

‘Have you had your lumbar puncture?’

‘Not yet. Wait until after. I do actually need to talk to you about something.’

Hannibal performed his displeasure well enough, but Will could tell his heart wasn’t in it. He had dangled the perfect bait, after all: he hadn’t been able to ask the nurse how much, but he did know a lumbar puncture hurt.

Because the position he had to assume was hard on his stomach, and because he had made the mistake of looking at the thick needle, the body-builder wearing a nurse’s uniform was unable to hold Will down on his own. In the end, he held Will’s hips and legs, and Hannibal held his arms—and his throat, where he’d leaned in enough to obscure it from view, threatening to press down should Will buckle any more. At least he had taken the coat off. Will bit into Hannibal’s wrist, the nearest thing in sight, and keened as the needle plunged deep, not feeling very much pain because of the anaesthetic but still *hating it hating it hating*

it—and terrified, too, because none of it did anything for him, Hannibal's hands on his throat or the weight of Hannibal on top of him, and everything else aside, that was sign enough he was ill—when was the last time he'd touched himself? He couldn't remember. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been hungry, either, even though he must have been eating *something*. A dead man, walking around. A dead man, and before his eyes, the long flash of the life he'd failed to live through.

Hannibal seemed happier to stay and talk, after this. Will suspected this was because he had been made to feel in control of Will's body, and he had seen Will cry in fear. This would have angered Will, usually, but he was very sick and very tired, and he had the signed divorce papers under his pillow to bring him solace.

'My head is killing me,' he complained.

'That is to be expected after the procedure.'

'Give me the water.'

Hannibal ignored him. He had sat himself down in a chair by the bed, plastic and creaking. It made Will think of the chair he'd sat in eleven years ago, on the day Will first saw his daughter. For a flash, he wanted to tell Hannibal this. He stomped down on the instinct. Something must have still showed on his face, though, because he saw Hannibal see it. He looked away.

'What did you want to talk about, Will?'

'If I have what you think I have,' Will said, his throat dry, 'then I might live. And then you and I need to figure out what to do about this.'

'I imagine you are referring to my daughter.'

'*Our* daughter. Yeah. I know you didn't read any of what you signed, but there are stipulations there. I am not giving up any of my time, and we're going to have to figure out how that will work.'

'Considering our daughter has tried to kill you, of course.'

'Sure. Let's start with that. Would you explain to *our daughter* that next time you coerce her into stabbing somebody, Jack Crawford of the FBI should not be her first call? Can you do that for me?'

'Perhaps a misguided choice,' Hannibal admitted. 'Although it did save your life.'

'Yeah. After *you* tried to get her to kill me. You do get that means the gloves are off, don't you? You try to turn her against me again, I'm going to turn her against you.'

'You would be putting her in a difficult position if you revealed anything of interest to the FBI. I suggest you don't do that.'

‘I don’t need to do that. I don’t need to tell her who you are. I’ll tell her you didn’t want her. I’ll tell her the only reason she’s alive is because you were curious what I would do if she lived. I’ll tell her you wanted to kill her that time she got sick, when she was just a baby. I’ll tell her about when she was two, about the three months you refused to touch her.’

Hannibal had gone still. If not for the slight movement at his throat where it bulged with blood, you might have thought all life in him had stopped.

But Will had died and come back to life, and he wasn’t afraid.

‘I don’t make empty threats, Hannibal.’

‘I know you don’t. But I do not enjoy being blackmailed.’

‘Yeah, well. Never said you’d enjoy it.’

‘What am I being blackmailed to do, exactly?’

‘Exactly what we agreed on last time. Don’t keep me away from her. Don’t try to turn her against me. If you kill, don’t be stupid about it. Easy.’

‘It’s interesting that you would make that criticism.’

Will sighed. ‘What criticism?’

‘About being *stupid* when killing. Considering your history. Mason Verger, for instance.’

‘We’re not having that conversation.’

‘We’ve never had that conversation. I do find it curious that you never told me about him. I thought you would eventually. You couldn’t have thought I’d have a negative reaction.’

‘I did at first,’ remembered Will, willing to give him what he wanted if it meant getting the conversation over with. ‘That would have been the normal fucking reaction. When I moved in, I lay awake at night sometimes, too afraid to fall asleep in case I dreamed about him, in case you heard and somehow knew. God, I was terrified that you’d find out what I’d done. Who I was. I was terrified of you, back then.’

Hannibal smiled.

‘And then—and then I knew you better, and I didn’t want to give you the satisfaction.’ He rubbed at his face. It felt numb. ‘Anyway. Why are we talking about this?’

‘It is interesting.’

‘It’s not interesting. Maybe back off now.’

‘Maybe?’

‘Maybe that’d be best for you.’

‘You never asked me to stop,’ Hannibal said. ‘Not when you were burying bodies for me, which is perhaps understandable considering how much you were enjoying it. But you didn’t ask when you knew who I was. Or any time after.’

Will did not want to talk about it. Out of everything, this was maybe the thing he wanted to talk about least of all. His head hurt, and his pride hurt, and he was thirsty. But he was also, deep down, a little afraid that if he didn’t give him what he wanted, Hannibal would leave. And while this would have been preferable on any other day—this would have been preferable now they were finally getting divorced, surely, but even back when they’d been married, Will would have chosen the satisfaction of denying him over the comfort that came from indulging him—today, he couldn’t remember what the point of satisfaction was.

‘I didn’t ask you to stop,’ he said through gritted teeth, hating himself for it even as he gave up any sense of dignity, ‘because I was afraid that you could. Because if you could stop, then I’d been letting it happen all along. I’d been encouraging it. I’d been—you’d been indulging me. Playing the part so I could live vicariously through your rage and your cruelty. So I could congratulate myself on saving you from yourself, then come home with blood on my hands and fuck you.’

There was silence for a moment. Will watched the fast-darkening ceiling.

When Hannibal next spoke, there was a smile in his voice. ‘It *is* essentially what happened, Will.’

Will laughed, and hissed when it hurt his stomach, and laughed again. ‘I’m sick,’ he said. ‘Jesus. Can’t you take it easy on me for once?’

Hannibal stood then, drew closer, and helped Will have some water.

Chapter End Notes

From the love advice corner: Communication is important. If what you need to get over a fight is for your partner to weaponize your brain disease and manipulate your child into trying to kill you, TELL THEM. You can’t always expect them to guess these things!

Next time, we're finally getting present Hannibal's POV. Who's excited?

Two weeks after the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

They had been married and they had been separated, but they had not been divorced yet. Hannibal found the novelty of it compelling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eighteen.
Two weeks after the Christmas Eve party.

Hannibal could never remember in any detail the day he first brought Will home from the hospital.

He was able to recall the days after to the minute: the shape of Will under the thick lavender-purple covers of Amelie's bed; the hush that swallowed the upstairs of the house, as though Will's illness was a caving into which all sound disappeared; the fold of the heart monitor sleeve over Will's bruised elbow. Amelie would whisper to Hannibal that she didn't like how her room smelled now—of blood, drying skin, of antiseptic and half-digested food—that she didn't like the overgrown beard on Will's chin, or the black eye adorning his face on either side, or the way they had to whisper when he slept.

He remembered, too, every meal he'd made in those days, and precisely which of these meals Amelie had scorned.

She would not eat her favourites. She would not eat anything that could not be easily pierced with a fork, anything with more than two colours, anything that glinted oil in the light. She might eat cream of wheat, but only with Nutella, and if she saw even a trace of the homemade jam, she would proclaim the plate contaminated. She might eat cinnamon rice, very thin broth with drop noodles, small pieces of bread if they were cut into symmetrical shapes, and steamed vegetables as long as they were unseasoned. She would agree, eventually, to eating at the table, provided Will didn't join them, but she never agreed this without a fight. She pretended sometimes to be just as sick as Will was, locking herself in the bathroom to act out vomiting, complaining of headaches and stomach-aches and fevers that felt cool to the touch. Hannibal allowed her to stay in bed, or on the sofa if she preferred, wrapped in covers until she was sweaty and kicking them off. He would not, however, allow eating in bed for anyone not recently hospitalised, and believed this was a fair line to draw.

Amelie came home two days after Will did. She had not wanted to. As she had outgrown begging, so resorted first to reason, then threat and finally violence. It was a convincing

enough display of hysteria that Margot privately drew Hannibal aside and suggested he let her stay as she wanted.

‘If she’s not ready to see him, maybe it would be for the best,’ she whispered. ‘If that’s how she’ll be with him—that can’t be good for either of them.’

But Hannibal knew Amelie would not bother putting on the same performance for Will. Put-on indifference would work better, and it was a lesser expense of energy than screaming.

There was a final effort at hiding Amelie in a closet by Thomas, which took up another half an hour, and at that point Hannibal found himself growing impatient to return home. While the danger eased with every passing day, there was still a chance of Will suffering a seizure or stroke, and Hannibal disliked the idea that he wouldn’t be there when they struck.

When they pulled out of the driveway, Amelie stopped crying at once.

‘Will is staying in your bedroom,’ said Hannibal, ‘so that he can use the ensuite bathroom. He cannot walk long distances at the moment, and he may need the toilet urgently as his body adjusts to digesting food on its own again. You may sleep with me for the time being, or in the guest bedroom.’

‘I hope he kills you in the night,’ Amelie said, ‘and then eats you, and then pukes you out.’

‘He likely would. It’ll take some time before he’s ready to eat red meat again.’

‘Then how long is he going to stay?’

‘Until he is able to take care of himself. Considering what happened, I think it is reasonable that we help him in the initial recovery stage.’

Amelie crossed her arms. ‘It’s not my fault he got sick,’ she said tightly.

‘No. And when you injured him, you were doing the right thing in the circumstances. But the circumstances have changed.’

Hannibal did not remember why the circumstances had changed. This was precisely the memory missing. Memories, he knew, formed around not events themselves but an interpretation of the events, and if this had not fully manifested, only a blankness remained.

He recalled vaguely Will’s first few minutes back at the house, his careful tread up the stairs, the thought that if he tripped and fell, his uneasy hold on the banister would not save him from breaking his neck. Now diagnosed and undergoing treatment, Will had emerged from the affair with a new determination for getting better and for repairing his relationship with his daughter, which Hannibal chose privately to take credit for. Perhaps Will had insinuated himself back into the house for this reason, and Hannibal had not realised until it was too late; or perhaps Hannibal had resolved to have him back, curious to trace out their new relationship. They had been married and they had been separated, but they had not been divorced yet. Hannibal found the novelty of it compelling.

There was a sense in Hannibal, in those first days, of reliving an improved version of the very beginnings of his marriage. When they were first married, Hannibal had had to contend with Will's moods and ambitions while keeping his own self forever in shadow. Now, his nature long familiar to Will, he was free to draw his own little pleasures from him. He alternated uncomfortable conversation aimed to wound with long stretches of dispassionate silence; he wore surgical gloves and asked after his vitals but never his sleep. He acted always through a clinical detachment that he hoped would help Will see him as his victims saw him: compassionate, focused, maintaining boundaries. If Will made the connection—and surely he must have done—he never showed this. He had told Hannibal he had been terrified of him when he'd first moved in, which Hannibal had always hoped to have been true. He did not appear in the least afraid now. This entertained Hannibal, too.

While Hannibal enjoyed himself, Will only lay, unable to leave, unable to walk around and touch Hannibal's things, too tired to put up a fight. If he had been severely ill while they were married, they might never have divorced. Hannibal envied momentarily Will's lover her own cancer-ridden husband, before remembering that he had not been nearly as fascinating with his suffering, or as beautiful.

Hannibal would never sink so low as to cheat on a terminally ill Will, either. He had not been unfaithful once in the twelve years they had known each other, and he had surely been given several better reasons to be.

On Will's fifth day home, Hannibal awoke at the least opportune of hours: just past three a.m. He spent a short while attempting to ease himself back into sleep for an hour or two more, at which point he could simply rise and start the day early. Quickly, he deemed the effort futile. He got up, put on a dressing gown to shield himself from the night's chill, and covered Amelie with an additional blanket to supplement the lack of his own body heat.

In the sick room, he found Will lying half-bare, the quilt kicked off the bed, the sheets in disarray. His T-shirt had ridden up when he'd tossed through a nightmare, revealing the packed wound across the stomach. His boxers, too, lay uneven, with one thigh exposed fully to the cool air. Hannibal could see his eyes moving wildly underneath the swollen eyelids.

It would be interesting, Hannibal thought, to see what Will post-divorce might be like. A few weeks ago, Will would have been furious at the idea of Hannibal observing him in such a vulnerable state, but now that they were getting divorced, did it matter? Will might say it was unimportant how Hannibal saw him if there was nothing anymore between them. It was entirely possible that, should Hannibal touch his thigh now, Will would accuse him of committing a crime. But with time enough, and little opportunity for physical comfort after the fiasco of his love affair, Will might well accept this sort of touch, if only to relieve the tension. After all, if they were divorced, it meant nothing.

He leaned over Will's stomach to smell the wound for any warning odours of developing infection. There were none. Now that the initial flush of desire had passed, he felt impatient with his earlier fantasy and annoyed with Will for displaying himself so shamelessly, and he covered him with the sheets and the quilt again.

Then, he searched the room.

There was nothing in the cupboards, nothing slipped under the mattress, nothing secreted under Will's pillows. He tried his dressing gown, the laundry hamper, he moved Amelie's old dollhouse from the back of the closet to check the empty corner behind it. He checked the inside of Will's shoes, the lining of his coat, the crossword he'd brought with him from the hospital.

The divorce papers were gone.

Will would not have had the chance to post them himself, so someone else must have done it for him. Hannibal resented the idea that he would bestow such a task on an outsider, entangling them in what should have been a private matter. But apparently he had done it, because if the divorce papers were not here, they must have been with Will's lawyer, if not with the court already.

'H—nibal? What time's it?'

Hannibal straightened. He tapped the screen of Will's phone, left to charge on the desk whose drawer he had just drawn shut.

'It's nearing four. You should go back to sleep.'

'You should go back to sleep.'

Hannibal agreed in principle.

There was a silence. Will did not ask what Hannibal had been doing, which meant in all likelihood he already knew but spared him saying it. It was the same beguiling kindness which had always been Will's favourite weapon: a mercy now, to be employed as a cruelty later.

Hannibal would not have liked to hurt him at present, so he kept to the side of the room, and peered out the window instead of looking at his face.

'Either I sleep twenty hours or twenty minutes,' he heard Will say. 'God. It's almost been two weeks. Why do I still feel like shit?'

'It takes months to recover from encephalitis and months to recover from a puncture wound to the stomach. Battling both at once is sure to further prolong convalescence.'

'Hopeless bedside manner, Doctor. Tell me I'm going to feel a little bit better every day.'

'You will not.'

'Do you think she'll ever talk to me again?'

Hannibal supressed the sigh. 'Acting the martyr doesn't suit you, Will.'

Behind Hannibal's back, Will laughed.

‘Be quiet, please,’ Hannibal warned, to no effect. ‘She will speak eventually. She does not with me, either.’

‘She does. I hear you downstairs sometimes. Well—I hear her. She gets loud.’

‘Then you understand the nature of these conversations.’

‘It does make me feel a little better. When she takes it out on you. I guess that’s the one advantage of not having her talk to me. I’ll never actually hear her say it, even if I know—hell, what does it matter? I never talked to my father, either, and I turned out fine.’

Will was laughing again. The sound grew more painful before it was cut off by a sharp intake of breath, and Will bit down on his tongue to win back control over his body. Hannibal looked at him, dissatisfied when he saw he hadn’t started crying.

‘Her anger with you is not the reason she will not speak to me, Will,’ he corrected. ‘She may not understand the situation fully, but she does understand my role in what she did.’

‘Yeah.’ Will yawned. ‘Okay. You should probably talk to her about that.’

Hannibal would have liked to talk to Amelie, certainly, but in order to do so, he needed first to settle on his own interpretation of what had occurred, and those days it seemed forever subject to amendment. He’d fall asleep certain that he had desired one outcome, and startle awake convinced of the opposite.

‘I will start on breakfast,’ he told Will. Only when he did, Will did not answer, disappeared again under the gentle cover of sleep.

The day Hannibal and Will were legally divorced, Hannibal had driven them to court. Their lawyers did most of the talking. Will was a sickly white colour, and he sweated an uncharacteristically unpleasant odour. When the judge asked him a question, Will’s lawyer had to repeat it in a hushed voice twice before it registered. Hannibal had been sat at a distance and couldn’t hear Will’s answer until the judge asked him to speak up.

After the hearing, Nathalie, Hannibal’s divorce lawyer, invited him for a coffee. Hannibal felt it might help the uneasiness in his stomach settle, so he agreed, and he extended a further invitation to Will, which naturally he had to accept or else he’d be stuck waiting in the car. Will brought his lawyer, too, because Will’s lawyer famously hated Hannibal with a passion, and they spent a pleasant hour discussing Maryland divorce rates and the best winter vacation destinations over coffee and cake. When this hour was up, Will rose and declared he was going to the bathroom.

Hannibal gave him five minutes to feel sorry about the consequences of his own actions, then apologised and went to find him. The men’s had two stalls with simple, turn-to-open plastic locks that were easily manipulated from the outside if one had careful fingers. Inside the stall, Will sat curled awkwardly, unable to fully assume his desired smallness with the stitches in his stomach. The right sleeve of his suit was soaked through with saliva, tears and phlegm.

‘And if I was shitting? What then?’

‘I have played your nurse for weeks, Will.’

‘Yeah. Well, watching me shit is off the table now we’re divorced. I had my lawyer add that clause specifically.’

Hannibal shut the stall door behind him. He took his time observing Will as he bunched up toilet paper, blew his nose and wiped his face. He thought of how this new Will, the Will that Hannibal was no longer married to, stood out clearly from the backdrop of the restroom, how the flushed red of his face had defeated the earlier pallor, and how sharp the edges of him were, how deep the colours of him, how melodic his staccato breaths.

‘Did you want to say something to me? Or are you just here to spectate?’

‘It went quite smoothly in the end,’ Hannibal remarked. ‘We really shouldn’t have delayed for so long.’

Will glared at him. ‘Yeah. Easier than killing me, wasn’t it?’

‘Marginally,’ agreed Hannibal.

The weather turned strange in the following few days, as though it could not decide between winter and spring. The mornings would be bleak and grey as though they were dusks, but the afternoons would stretch bright and crisp, with a breath of warmth carried on the breeze. On the way to school in the morning, Hannibal and Amelie would make bets on whether or not it would snow or hail by dinnertime, and the odds seemed forever stacked in favour of the unexpected.

‘It’s snowing,’ Amelie would come into the kitchen to report later. ‘You should tell Will. He won’t know to look if he’s sleeping.’

‘You could tell him yourself.’

‘No.’

So Hannibal would go and relay the message to Will, who would relay back his surprise at the snow, and his gratitude at having been given motivation to stumble out of bed.

Will felt good enough sometimes to have breakfast downstairs, but by nighttime he would be either dead to the world or in too much pain to move. Hannibal would bring him his food on his favourite tray, the one Hannibal and Amelie had once hand-painted for his birthday, and he would listen patiently to Will’s repetitive quips.

‘Cream of wheat, no sugar no fruit no coffee? You spoil me, chef.’

‘Oh, rice pudding, my favourite. I could eat nothing else my whole life, you know—well, you do know. You make dreams come true.’

And he would watch Will eat awkwardly around his pain, determined always to finish the portion, as though by doing so, he would be miraculously restored to health.

‘Have you told Will it’s stopped snowing?’

‘I will tell him later. He is asleep now.’

‘Okay,’ Amelie sighed. ‘If you’re divorced now, are you even supposed to live in the same house?’

‘No, it is highly illegal, and it carries a long sentence. You must remember to keep it a secret, Amelie.’

She grinned, taken immediately by the fantasy of seeing him punished so severely.

‘If you’re nice to me, I will,’ she said sweetly.

The weather broke at last over the weekend when Margot and Thomas came for a visit. The world thawed, and the garden behind the house was unpleasantly wet and muddy. The dogs did not mind in the slightest. Margot had selected three of the smallest to bring with them, which had been perhaps poor foresight on Hannibal’s part: he should have remembered size did not necessarily translate to a sweet nature, nor to good behaviour. One dog stayed in Will’s lap, salivating and barking noisily whenever Will forgot for a moment to pet her. The other two abandoned Will after the initial frenzy of greetings in favour of marking the garden as their territory, and covering themselves, the plush toys Amelie had given them to play with, and the children, in dirt.

From inside the house, Will sat and watched. The wooden chair couldn’t have been comfortable on his hypersensitive skin, and the draught from the glass screen was making him shivery. Hannibal had suggested they left the children to entertain the dogs and set up on the sofa in the sitting room, but Amelie had chosen that moment exactly to warn Will he was not allowed to play with them.

‘Can I watch from inside, though?’ he’d asked, and Amelie had said yes. It was the first conversation they’d had since the incident. This meant, of course, that Will would stay in front of the garden door and watch until he collapsed from exhaustion or was bodily dragged away.

Being divorced, thought Hannibal as he fixed a plate for the children, was on the whole more pleasant than he’d imagined. He had anticipated he would experience primarily negative feelings on the tail of delivering Will the thing he had fought for so viciously, but in the end Will’s victory had been hollow, bringing him a small amount of relief and a much greater amount of sorrow. Separation had grown stale over the years, even Hannibal had to admit that, while divorce allowed him a greater freedom in outlining again a new definition of Will: a Will that was separate from Hannibal. Though this necessitated Hannibal being very careful about muzzling the thing in him that rebelled against the concept, it was overall an interesting exercise.

He brewed another coffee for Margot, who could go through four before she was satisfied. He contemplated preparing something lighter on the stomach for Will, then decided that Will could go without a drink, considering he hadn't asked for one. This would have been impossible to decide while they were married, but now it only made sense. Hannibal smiled.

There was a sound of feet, and Thomas manifested in the door. 'Amelie says to tell you that we're hungry,' he reported.

'I imagined so.'

'How old is Buster? Because Amelie doesn't know.'

'I'm afraid I don't know, either. You'll have to ask Will.'

Thomas did not look taken with the idea. Amelie would have had sufficient time to sour him against Will, and whatever fading memories of him Thomas might have preserved from his early childhood would do little to prevent shyness now. Hannibal considered the idea of asking Will for him, then decided Thomas would interpret this as patronising. The main thing that Thomas liked was to be taken seriously.

'Will enjoys talking about his dogs,' Hannibal advised instead. 'He will be happy to be asked. I would be very grateful if you entertained him with a little conversation, too. Convalescence has been difficult for him.'

'Yeah, okay.' Thomas thought, then gave a decisive nod. 'I'll talk to him later, after the dogs are tired out. It's important to tire them out so they sleep better.'

'That is very true.'

Hannibal finished the coffee and the food. He wiped the counters clean. He went to flick off the lights, before remembering he hadn't needed to turn them on, what with the uncanny winter sunlight bathing the house.

He stopped short of entering the dining room at the soft sound of conversation. There was a note in the tone it carried that suggested intimacy, and Hannibal suspected his presence would put an end to it.

'The devil you know isn't always the better devil,' Margot was saying.

It should be said that Hannibal enjoyed conversations about devils. Curious for an insight into the new Will's mind on the matter, he chose nevertheless not to join in, only lingered in the doorway, assuming such stillness that he remained unnoticed.

'Your new devil lured you in with promises of control,' murmured Will. 'But you exchanged one kind of collar for another.'

The tray was heavy in Hannibal's hand. He watched it to ensure he kept it balanced, lest a teaspoon chimed against a teacup.

‘I don’t feel collared,’ said Margot. ‘I’ve had more control this past decade than ever before. I wasn’t raised to complain about a good enough thing.’

‘Just because the chain sits loose doesn’t mean there isn’t a chain, Margot.’

Margot’s laughter rang through the room. It was a rare thing, and Hannibal appreciated it.

‘What?’ snapped Will, quick to defensiveness as usual.

‘Will,’ she said. ‘There’s always a chain.’

The statement settled in Hannibal for a moment, giving more weight to his bones. He did not like the way it felt. He remembered suddenly the day he placed the knife in Amelie’s hand, the day he plotted his punishment, the day he drew the sketches to make her understand, and the day Will came home from the hospital.

He heard Will say, ‘Don’t I know it.’ He heard him laugh.

And Hannibal felt the chain snap tight.

Chapter End Notes

All this drama, all this nonsense -- and now we find out that neither of them knows what a divorce actually is.

Next time, Amelie's POV!

Six weeks after the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

If she took the snail out of her snail box, Amelie thought, and pressed down with a socked foot, could she make it so that the shell cracked, but the snail survived? And could she do it again after the snail got a little better, and again and again forever?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nineteen.
Six weeks after the Christmas Eve party.

Will unfurled her little tentacles and scented the air. Bit by bit, she edged forward, climbed over the apple slice, and began to eat.

From her nest of blankets on the sofa, Amelie watched, the box balanced on her stomach. She had grown convinced in the last weeks the snail would never eat. She had contemplated already how she might paint her shell once it was empty, which she did with all her dead snails. It was difficult, precise work, dabbing the coarse bone-like structure with a horse brush thin as a needle. Amelie wasn't very good at it, but she was getting better. When she got things wrong, she no longer crushed the shells in frustration, at least.

It was Saturday, so there was no school, and not much to do except stay in bed, just as Amelie liked these days. She had no bed anymore of her own—this had been taken from her—so she'd moved onto the sofa in the sitting room right after breakfast, hefting her blankets, her snail and the book she was never going to read. She never read anymore, or watched anything, or listened to music; she did not draw, either, except at art club. She liked staying very still instead, watching her convalescent snail, or pretending to herself she'd been wounded like Will had and needed equally to be nursed to health.

It had been the Chesapeake Ripper who'd wounded her, as he did with Will, only unlike Will Amelie had fought back, and she had stabbed him twice, low in the stomach on either side, before he'd thrown her off and run away.

'I'd have chased him, except I had to call someone for Will,' she'd explained to Tėtis, who liked talking about this. 'And anyway, he is dead. Because I stabbed him on either side, so neither of his kidneys survived. How long can you live if both your kidneys fail?'

'It varies greatly,' he told her. 'He could be dead in a few days if he gets no help. With dialysis, however, or a kidney transplant, he could go on to live for many years.'

‘I tore his liver, too,’ Amelie decided. ‘And the gut, so everything inside spilled out and infected the torn liver and the kidneys. He’ll get sepsis and die, if he hasn’t already.’

‘That is very possible. It would be a painful death.’

Amelie liked to imagine this. She did, often, when lying on the sofa.

Today, the imagining was made difficult by the dogs. They weren’t used to the new place yet, she’d overheard Will say, and they were nervous because of all the changes, and this was why they were going crazy. It was a full-time job petting them, and it was challenging to think dark thoughts while doing it.

Now that it had been hours she’d stayed cooped up, the blankets were making her too warm. She lifted the snail box and kicked them off the sofa, where they were immediately snatched by the dogs. Amelie was beginning to despise the blankets, and the sofa, and the whole room, swelled on heat and dim even in daylight. She wanted out of it, wanted the cold and the fresh air, but she was injured and sick, and did not like to leave the house unattended.

She took the snail and went upstairs, the dogs tailing behind her, dragging the blankets.

In her bedroom, Will was finishing his baked apple. For once, the usual stench of the room was less assaulting, secondary to cinnamon and clove. Tėtis was sitting on the edge of the bed, saying something, but he stopped when Amelie stood in the door.

‘Do you want to see my snail?’ Amelie asked in English. She did her best never to speak English in Will’s presence these days, lest he thought mistakenly she was speaking to him.

‘Sure.’ Out the corner of her eye, she saw him set the cut-glass bowl aside. ‘Is this the snail we found in Wolf Trap? With the cracked shell?’

‘Yes.’

She drew up by the bed and put the box in his lap. ‘She’s going to live,’ she said, even though from looking at the snail this was obvious.

‘That’s good news. What’s her name, then?’

‘I don’t want to tell you.’

‘Okay.’

They watched the snail for a while. Amelie wondered if the snail could smell the cinnamon, and whether or not she would like it if she got some.

‘Amelie,’ Tėtis broke the silence. ‘The rain has stopped. Shall we take the dogs to the park now?’

Amelie pinched a loose bit of pillow cover between her fingers. This wasn’t the side Will slept on, so the pillow didn’t smell as much of sweat, and it felt dry to the touch. ‘You can walk the dogs on your own, can’t you?’ she said.

‘Yeah, you can,’ said Will. ‘We’ll stay home and watch the snail. Only fair.’

‘I would like to remind you both that it was Amelie who insisted on keeping the dogs here. I recommended they should rejoin the pack at the Verger estate.’

‘I said I want them to stay here, not that I want to take them on walks,’ Amelie disagreed, without looking up from the pillow. ‘I was thinking that *you* should take them on walks. I just didn’t say it.’

‘They’re good dogs. You’ll manage.’

‘They are good dogs who get overexcited by the unfamiliar city environment and prove very difficult to control.’

‘You’ve always liked a challenge. No?’

She could feel them looking at each other. She didn’t like it usually, but now she had to peer up to see, if only to adjust adequately her own approach, and she saw Will’s face just as he said, *Hannibal*, and on his face there was a half-warning and half-meaning, like the look you passed a friend to remind them of a secret.

Amelie could not have said what the secret was. She only knew Tėtis had grasped it, because he gave up the argument then, and he went downstairs for the leashes without bothering Amelie about it. When they heard the characteristic clink of a harness, the three dogs sprinted after him, and Amelie was alone in her room with the two Wills.

She considered an escape. If she left now, though, Will was going to feel that he had fought Tėtis for nothing, and he’d be annoyed with her, and already Tėtis was annoyed with her—and Amelie was injured, was she not, so no one should be annoyed with her for doing anything?

‘Hey,’ said Will in a very careful kind of voice, which was the voice she hated most. It made her want to hurt him. ‘You want to watch a movie?’

Amelie shrugged. Will got his laptop from the bedside table and stood it where the snail box had been. He’d put the snail right by the baked apple he hadn’t finished. The apple smelled warm and good. Tėtis would make it for Amelie when she was sick, with pear, too, and hazelnut crumble, and a spoonful of softly whipped cream.

‘Do you want to finish it?’

Amelie said nothing. She took the bowl when he gave it to her, and she sat delicately on the bed next to him. She leaned against the dry pillow. There was no cream in the baked apple, but it was acceptable. She ate.

They chose from the collection of princess movies with Lithuanian dubbing, which Will still had on his hard drive. Amelie no longer watched things like this, normally, but for a strange reason today she thought it would be worse to watch anything else. She liked it, too, when

Will moved his lips as though he was trying to repeat after the voice actors. He always used to do that.

‘What do you watch these days?’ he asked Amelie.

‘I don’t know. Normal movies. For adults.’

‘We can watch something normal for adults if you like.’

She shook her head. She had ridden lower on the pillow into half-lying, happy to be in her own bed again even if it smelled wrong. Will’s elbow was right by her ear. He was wearing a robe that covered his arms all the way, so you could not see the bruises from the IV line. He was always cold now, the opposite of before.

‘You want to get under the covers, sugar bug? It’s cold here.’

It was stupid manipulation to achieve a thing Will wanted, and Amelie wasn’t going to fall for it. She had told him he wasn’t allowed to call her baby names, too. It was brave of him to do it anyway.

‘Because the window is open,’ she pointed out.

‘Tėtis wanted to air it out. Come on.’

‘I’m already sick, so it doesn’t matter.’

‘You’re sick? Where?’

Amelie touched her chest and her stomach, and then her eyes for good measure. The world went black when she did. It was nice.

‘Get under the covers, then. Best thing to do is to sweat it out. I’ll close that window, too.’

‘I’m not cold.’

‘No arguing.’

Amelie sighed but let him pull the covers from under her and swaddle her up. She wasn’t sure the sweating would work. The sheets could hardly take in more damp, and Tėtis changed them every day already. She had always enjoyed the fact that sick people were disgusting, but Will worked harder at it than she’d ever seen before. But the half-formed stool and half-digested food leaking out of a sliced gut, and flooding the Ripper’s stomach cavity, would have been even more disgusting, and it would kill him, too, where Will didn’t seem anymore like he was going to die.

The shapes on the screen blurred into colours when Amelie’s eyes relaxed. She could still make them out in between the eyelashes, and anyway she remembered everything that happened in the movie from when she was little. She put her head against Will’s elbow. He moved himself down the bed to put the arm around her, wincing and trembling from the pain

as he did. Tėtis had said Will had started cutting back on pain medication; it was because he had an addictive personality.

His robe, where Amelie's face pressed against it, smelled of Will, of pain, and of sea-salty sweat. Amelie's heart was beating everywhere in her body, which was the wrong thing to have happen when you lay close to someone; heartbeats were supposed to slow, muscles to relax, which was the whole point of the oxytocin, and Amelie didn't understand why hers wasn't doing its job.

'Are you going to move out?' she asked.

'When I'm better.'

If she took the snail out of her snail box, Amelie thought, and pressed down with a socked foot, could she make it so that the shell cracked, but the snail survived? And could she do it again after the snail got a little better, and again and again forever?

The movie ended. Will played another one at random. Amelie didn't think he was watching anymore. He got tired too quickly.

Some time later, the door opened downstairs and there was a bit of commotion. Tėtis never came up, though, or the dogs neither. She had officially been abandoned into Will's company merely for not wanting to walk in grey weather, and this was not at all reasonable. She tucked her head close under Will's arm, because at least he wasn't making her walk anywhere.

Outside was getting dark. It was a good thing Will had closed the window, because soon enough rain thundered on the glass.

'Are you asleep, sweetheart?'

'No.'

'Can I ask you something?' He was whispering as though it was nighttime. For Will, maybe it was. 'Tėtis said that you don't want to see the therapist he found for you. Is that because you don't want to see any therapist, or just because he found her?'

'Any therapist.'

'Why?'

Amelie didn't want to talk about it. 'I'm watching the movie.'

'I'm not a fan of therapists, either. But it could help you, to talk about what happened. To make sure you, uh—you understand what happened. That you have it all clear in your head.'

'I have it clear in my head. But it's no one's business except mine.'

'Okay. I get that. It's a little bit my business, too, though. Isn't it?'

'A little bit,' agreed Amelie unhappily.

‘And Tėtis—’

‘It’s not *his* business.’ The anger rose quick and terrifying, and she pressed close to Will, closer-closer, and she didn’t want to even think about it—but the thought came anyway, of crushing an empty snail shell in her hand, of the satisfying crack of bone, of the name she’d give the snail if the snail died.

Will paused the movie.

‘Alright, listen to me,’ he ordered, drawing her away to meet her eye. ‘Yes, Tėtis wanted you to hurt me. But I hurt him first. Do you remember?’

Amelie couldn’t think. She saw nothing anymore except the empty shell, and then nothing except Will’s face, and then she saw that day when Will had first tried to take her away—the worst day until her new worst day—

‘Yes,’ she said softly.

‘I shouldn’t have done it, but I was afraid. That’s why I did it. And he was afraid. And you were afraid, just the same, when you stabbed me, weren’t you? Fear—fear makes us fight when we need to, but sometimes it stops us from seeing clearly. You know?’

She swallowed. Her voice came out sounding very thin and odd. ‘Were you going to kill him?’

‘No,’ he said immediately. ‘No, I wanted to. But I wasn’t going to do it.’

‘Did he?’

‘Did he want you to kill me?’

She nodded, and Will sighed.

‘I don’t think he knew what he wanted.’

Amelie didn’t understand that. She could understand Will better, she thought, because she always knew what she wanted, even when the things she wanted were awful. Like crushing the snail under her foot, watching her foam up in pain and distress, like watching the blood foam and bubble just the same when you put a knife in someone’s stomach. She was not going to do the things she imagined, but it would have been a lie to pretend she didn’t want to. If Tėtis was afraid—and she hadn’t realised he had been, and felt bad about it now—then shouldn’t he have known what the fear wanted, one way or the other?

‘What were *you* afraid of?’ she asked, because if she could fathom Tėtis being afraid, she could hardly imagine Will being afraid of anything except her.

Will stared, then laughed. ‘Were you never afraid of Tėtis?’ he asked incredulously. ‘Not for a moment?’

Amelie pulled away. She shuffled out of the sheets. Her feet found the cold floor. In the drawer of her desk, hidden among the sketches and notes and loose marker pens, she found the drawing.

When she showed it to Will, she saw at first the blankness of confusion on his face, and then she saw exactly the moment he understood the thing she couldn't. He knew about the not-Amelie, then. This meant Amelie was right, and the not-Amelie was real.

'I did the colours. It was just the pencil before.'

Colouring it in hadn't helped. She'd thought she might have understood it better, like she understood better the details of Tėtis's architectural sketches when she took the time to shade in every window.

'Yeah, I figured. Where did you find this?'

'Just in the study.'

Will sighed. 'You should ask Tėtis about it.'

Panic leapt to Amelie's throat. 'No,' she pleaded. 'No, don't show him.'

But Will was already standing up. Amelie would have clung to him and weighed him down with her body, if only she wasn't terrified of hurting him again.

'We've all been afraid too long, Amelie.' He took her by the hand and pulled, and she felt too small to fight. 'We'll choose seeing clearly now.'

In the kitchen, Tėtis had just put the casserole in the oven. The three dogs sat patiently by his side, with their heads turned up. The smell of root vegetables, broth and butter made everything about it seem normal, like any day, except that Amelie saw now that every normal day had a not-normal twin, like Amelie and the drawing, and that no day was merely the thing it appeared on the surface.

'How about chocolate pudding for dessert?' Tėtis said, like he always did after they'd disagreed, to show he wasn't annoyed. 'If you would help me prepare it now, it should be ready to come out of the fridge shortly after dinner.'

Then he looked at them, and noticed they were in the twin world, the reverse, the not-real side of the day—and his face went blank, like it did sometimes before he decided what the expression should be, and even that reminded Amelie of the girl in the drawing.

Over her head, Will gave him the folded piece of paper. It wasn't the most important thing, Amelie knew, but even so she felt nothing in the moment except shame that she'd stolen it, that she'd folded it in half like it was a shopping list and coloured it without his permission.

There was a silence. Little Ellie whined because she could smell the sweet potato, but no one was giving her any. Everyone ignored her, and Amelie felt sad about it, so she knelt by her

side to distract her with petting.

The drawing appeared in Amelie's field of vision. Tėtis had come down to the floor.

'I had a sister,' he said in English. 'Her name was Mischa. She died when she was very young.'

It felt like the floor was falling out from under Amelie.

'How did she die?'

'She was starved and murdered,' she heard Will say from behind her back. It was a harsh thing to say, and she glanced up at Tėtis, but his face was still the same blank thing. 'She might have been four or five years old, we're not sure. Tėtis doesn't remember.'

Amelie didn't know what to say then.

'When you were a little girl, you looked very much like her,' Tėtis helped. 'You had the same hair, the same shape of the face, the same complexion, even a similar smell. It was a strange thing for me to look at you or to touch you because of this resemblance. And I was never sure if the resemblance was entirely genuine. I thought my memories of her were changing how I remembered you, when you weren't there for me to look at. And when I did see you, and you were not the same as in my mind, it startled me.'

Amelie swallowed. 'Do I look like that?' she whispered, eyes on the drawing. 'When you remember me?'

'No. Mischa never lived to grow up as much as you have. Eventually, you changed beyond the resemblance, and the opposite effect occurred. Now, it is difficult for me to remember what she looked like, without thinking of you. I don't have any photographs of her.'

It was the missing piece, and now when Amelie looked at the drawing, she thought she understood like Will did. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

'For colouring it? I don't mind. I wasn't happy with how it turned out. I think it is improved.'

Amelie shook her head.

'You can't remember what your sister looked like anymore because of her,' Will translated. 'That's why she's sorry.'

Tėtis touched her cheek, and she had to meet his eye. His face wasn't blank anymore, and it made everything a little better. 'Do not mourn for my sake, Amelie. It is only time passing.'

'Time passing is sad,' she murmured.

'Yes. But wouldn't it be worse, if time never passed?'

She drew her arms around his neck, pressed his face into her shoulder and cried horribly, like her lungs wanted to come out of her chest.

‘Why are you crying, my sweet girl?’ he whispered in Lithuanian, lifting her close to his chest, where no one would hear.

Amelie couldn’t have explained—it was too big, too much, it would have taken days and nights and words she didn’t know—so she said the first lie that came to her mind, she said, ‘Because she died,’ and right then she realised the lie was true.

In the after, Amelie was in bed again, but it was Tėtis’s bed, with the light down low and the rain easing outside, and she was clean and showered, on top of the sheets, in shorts and a thin undershirt, because she was too warm for anything else. She was eating her portion of casserole from a bowl set in her lap, and eyeing already the chocolate and fruit laid out on a plate at her side, which would have to do for tonight in lieu of the pudding.

Tėtis did not eat, but he watched her. At first Amelie thought it was in case she dropped anything on the bed, but then she did drop a piece of parsnip, and he didn’t move at all, a worrying thing. She tried to feign fulness and get him to finish the portion, which he would not do, but he did have a piece of chocolate when she put it to his lips and refused to leave him be.

A strange thing, that when they sat like this, and then later when they turned the light off and lay close together in the darkness, Amelie felt new and shy, as though they hadn’t done the same the night before. Like they’d been fighting, or not talking to each other, and now they were friends again—but they only ever fought briefly, and they’d never not spoken, not even after what had happened with Will.

She touched his forehead, where the hairline was, and he opened his eyes. ‘I’ve forgotten her name,’ she whispered.

‘Her name was Mischa.’

‘Because you only said it once.’

‘That’s understandable.’

‘Did she speak English, or just Lithuanian?’

‘Only Lithuanian.’

‘Did she like dogs?’

‘I think so. We had a dog when we were children.’

‘Did she like snails? You liked snails when you were little.’

‘She didn’t dislike them. But I was the one who kept them. She was never interested. I’m not sure she saw them as animals, entirely, more as things. She enjoyed feeding the dog bits of food off her plate, but when I fed the snails fruit, she often stole it for herself before they were finished.’

Amelie was privately going to judge her poorly for this, but then decided to be kind. ‘I guess she was just a baby, so she didn’t know better.’

It was difficult to make out his features in the dark, but she thought he smiled. ‘Sleep now.’

‘Can we talk about her more another day?’ It was important to talk about things until they were clear in your head, and Amelie didn’t think anymore a lot was clear in Tėtis’s head, considering.

‘Yes, of course. But another day.’

‘Okay. Another day *soon*.’

She had not done much of anything today, but Will had exhausted her, and then Tėtis and all the crying, and she felt soon enough the tiredness encroaching, making her limbs heavy and her face numb. She did not want to sleep yet, though, only lie and remember what it had felt like before, for years and years, to be Amelie, whose house this was, and whose story it was, and whose Tėtis belonged to her alone. She was this Amelie again, tonight, returned in some way to herself, only now she knew it had never been just her, or just her and Tėtis, that there had always been someone else. Knowing this made it better. Knowing made it okay that there should be someone else: a dead girl, a ghost, another Tėtis, even this other Amelie she’d become that night in the woods, with the knife.

‘Is Will going to move out?’ she whispered to him.

Tėtis did not answer immediately.

‘It’s very possible he will, but I cannot say for sure. Do you want him to?’

She would have been ashamed to say it to anyone else. ‘No.’

He hummed and kissed the tip of her head. She didn’t ask what he wanted, in case he wasn’t able to tell.

Chapter End Notes

And this is it for Amelie's POV! Let's give her a round of applause for surviving everything up to this point.

Next time, our last chapter in Will's POV: a morning conversation that gets... emotionally intense. I'm really looking forward to it!

Seven weeks after the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

> *When he braved opening his eyes again, he saw Hannibal sitting on the floor opposite him, his back against the kitchen island. He took a sip of his coffee, and he looked at Will, and Will remembered so many mornings they'd done this, but never on the floor, never in the exact nightclothes they wore now, never feeling like this morning felt.*
>
> *'What are you thinking?' Hannibal asked.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Twenty.
Seven weeks after the Christmas Eve party.

Recovery was not linear. Will had been stabbed—twice, now—he had had wisdom teeth removed, he'd fought his way through several preschool bugs, and he'd got divorced. He knew this.

It still startled him to wake up one morning, after weeks and weeks of feeling like absolute shit, and discover he was fine.

The pain, his constant companion, had ebbed to a point where it could almost be forgotten. His brain, which had felt too swollen for thinking, was clear. His mouth, dry and parched and forever burning from barely closed cuts, only tingled numbly. Most importantly, his legs took his weight easily when he stood, and unlike yesterday or the day before, he *wanted* to stand: he wanted out of bed, he wanted downstairs, he wanted never to listen again to the murmurs of conversation through the wall, and he wanted coffee.

It was just past five o'clock, too early for anyone to be awake. Ellie, Zoe and Buster rose, though, at the sound of his footsteps. Will had no idea what time Hannibal usually let them out, but it must have been later, because they seemed confused with him, and gave no sign of wanting to come downstairs. He had been comforted by their presence, though he'd done his best to deny Hannibal seeing it, but he'd not had the energy before to truly enjoy it. Bending over and picking one up sounded risky, so he took the pleasure he could out of their patter behind him, their paws on his knees as they stood up on their hind legs to scratch at his bare skin, the sound of their breathing.

All four of them together went to the bathroom, where Will washed his teeth and his face, and shaved, too, and rubbed thick ointment into every red, itchy bit of hived skin. His things were all over the sink and cabinet, disarrayed from his half-blind palming when every day he was too tired to do anything properly. Hannibal cleaned up, but not at the rate Will was

creating the mess, and he looked at it with dissatisfaction: his new pharmacy-grade cosmetics were mixed up with Amelie's, his medication stuffed haphazardly into the boxes where she kept her jewellery and hair things.

Will took an account of everything, cleared out one shelf for himself and just a corner of space over the sink, and he spent a while untangling a pendant Amelie hadn't locked properly. He wiped the sink clean, and the mirror, and still he found he didn't want to sleep again.

The dogs had grown bored with him by then and returned to their beds. He tried half-heartedly to coax them into coming downstairs, but it was drizzling, and no one except Buster would consider getting wet for anything.

Finally, Will let them be, went down into the kitchen, and made coffee.

When he had been living here, back when he was still a married man, this might have been his morning. Hannibal rose either very early or very late, depending on when he managed to get to sleep, but Will had used to have a built-in alarm clock, once. He would often enjoy the morning quiet of the house. He'd get the laundry going, he'd take Belle for a quick walk around the block, he'd brew the strongest coffee he could and sip it as he unloaded the dishwasher.

He half-expected to be cast into a memory now of such a morning, to see the glint of the wedding band on his hand, to mistake the names of the dogs and start going over a lecture in his head which he'd already given years ago. But he stayed where he was, on the same morning and in the same body, and when he grew so dizzy from standing that he had to lower himself onto the tiled floor and put his head between his knees, he laughed in frustration, and because he felt alive.

'And what is your plan,' Hannibal asked, 'for getting up from down there?'

The black was fading from Will's vision, but he wouldn't chance it, so he kept his head down a while longer. 'Haven't thought about it,' he said through gritted teeth. 'There's coffee if you want.'

He felt Hannibal step up beside him to pour out the coffee. He heard the fridge door open, the turning of a cap, the splash of milk. Something brushed against his wrist, and when he flexed his hand open, a cup was pressed into his grip.

When he braved opening his eyes again, he saw Hannibal sitting on the floor opposite him, his back against the kitchen island. He took a sip of his coffee, and he looked at Will, and Will remembered so many mornings they'd done this, but never on the floor, never in the exact nightclothes they wore now, never feeling like this morning felt.

'What are you thinking?' Hannibal asked.

'Just looking at you. Remembering what you look like. Almost managed to forget, lately.'

Hannibal made a face to show he thought Will was being dramatic. Anger flared in Will at this, because of course he was being dramatic, but who'd decided on dramatic first?

'Ice-skating,' he started listing. 'Theatre. Waterpark. I don't even know where you disappeared off to yesterday, but I know I barely saw either of you all day.'

'Just a shopping trip.' Hannibal smiled. 'Amelie requested to have her ears pierced, and then we needed to purchase a few options for when the titanium comes out.'

'Oh, well. Thanks for involving me in that decision.'

'Would you prefer she stay confined to the house, now that she's finally expressed an interest in leaving it?'

'No,' Will said sweetly. 'I would prefer you didn't punish me because she came to *me* with something first. Which is doubly insulting, because you know how long it's been since—'

Will would have stopped there. Over the last weeks, he had figured out a strategy of how to talk to Hannibal and not develop headaches, and an important part of that was to know when to shut up. Will was in enough pain as things stood.

But today, he had woken up feeling more like himself than he had in a long time. Pain, he thought suddenly, was often worth it.

'You did it with the mediator, too,' he spat. 'We weren't together anymore, but that never stopped you from playing your crazy fucking game of one-upmanship. *Will* is a slave to his base instincts so of course he's sleeping around, but *you* would never do that. Will doesn't know how to talk to his preteen daughter, but you're the better father, see, the better partner, too—you take dogs on walks in the rain—'

Hannibal took another sip of coffee. 'I am the better partner,' he stated simply. 'I was ready to compromise to make our marriage work, and you were not.'

He'd startled a laugh out of Will. It hurt his throat. Already, there was pain.

'That wasn't compromise. That was a stupid fucking ploy to keep me where you wanted me. Best thing about it, I wasn't going anywhere.'

'You weren't? But you left so very quickly the moment you realised a family couldn't save you from who you are. Or did you forget that?'

Will took a long breath through the nose, out again. His head had started to pound, in beat with his heart.

Hannibal had had enough of a break from Will the past few days, clearly, to mellow him a little, because when he next spoke, he was half-trying for reconciliatory.

'Agnes did tell me off privately for accusing you of an affair, when any expectation of fidelity should have been void. If that makes you feel better.'

‘Who’s Agnes?’

Hannibal blinked. ‘Our mediator, Will.’

‘Oh, right. Her. I like her.’

‘Do you?’ There was a smile in his voice.

‘It’s easier when I don’t learn their names.’

‘What is?’

‘Not letting it get to me. How they feel about it—what they think about us, all the time. Helps cut myself off, a little. Distance.’

‘Ah.’

They were silent for a while, drinking the coffee. Will’s had been diluted with milk, which was not his preference, but Hannibal thought he needed to be having more protein. The problem was, Will’s digestive system didn’t tend to enjoy most protein, even while it was completely necessary for it to rebuild itself—a self-sabotage of the highest order.

‘We’re not married anymore,’ said Will after a while. ‘We got divorced. You realise that?’

‘Yes. Do you not?’

‘I’m not sure I do, half the time. I think I’ve been too hazy, lately, to realise it. Felt it a bit just after court. Then stopped feeling it. Been waking up surprised sometimes, to remember.’

‘And are you feeling clearer today?’

‘Yeah.’ Will swallowed. ‘I’m not sure I like feeling clear.’

Hannibal smiled at him indulgently. ‘That is obviously untrue. You like it very much.’

‘Do I?’

‘In the end, you prefer truth to happiness, no matter the cost. We know that, don’t we?’

Will set his coffee down. He looked at Hannibal, in his robe, in his pyjamas, with a face that was the same as it had been the day they’d met, only aged slightly around the eyes, changed around the mouth, less flat than when Will saw him in his mind.

‘It doesn’t bother you? Living together like this, but not—’

‘Not very much.’

‘No,’ sighed Will. ‘Why would it? You’ve wanted the truth, and here is truth.’

Hannibal did not deny it. ‘Perhaps the difference between us, then, is that I can be satisfied with the truth, whatever form it takes. You are determined to find a truth that you prefer,

which can only bring you disappointment, or deception.'

'Sounds like I'm doomed, then.' He thought about asking, changed his mind, did anyway. 'Were you ever happy? With me?'

He gave him a minute to think about it, though it hurt his chest.

'At times,' Hannibal decided. 'Yes.'

'At times. Wow.' Will exhaled. 'Tell me a time.'

The next silence was longer, and the pain grew until Will had to laugh from it.

'Difficult to find an answer I'll want to hear, huh?' He didn't wait for what he knew would be confirmation. 'Come on, Hannibal. We were married four years.'

'Eight years.'

'Okay. Eight years counting the four years we were divorcing.' He saw Hannibal opening his mouth and shook his head quickly. 'No, no, keep looking. I'm in too much pain to hear anything horrible.'

He took up his coffee again to give himself something to do. It wasn't too bad, with the milk, only the sweetness of it no longer matched his mood. Or did it? There was a peace here, too, in talking about it so openly. He'd never have been able to do it, before the divorce. Or before nearly dying, he thought sourly, though certainly he was not going to tell Hannibal this—assuming he didn't realise already.

'Amelie was three years old,' Hannibal spoke. 'It was summer. The evenings were long, and there was still some light in the kitchen, through the window, casting itself over the counters. The usual colours were made warmer. Amelie was growing out of midday naps, and we would stop them a few weeks later, but that day she'd slept, so she had too much energy, and she was running around the house. She'd tripped over the dog on the stairs, and she'd scraped her knees. I was washing up in the kitchen, listening to Handel, I think, when I heard the scream. There were no more band-aids in the kitchen, so I went upstairs to find more, and when I came back in, you'd changed the music to Sam Cooke. It was loud, swelling the kitchen. You were dancing, Amelie in your arms. She was determined to keep crying, only she was laughing through it, and that upset her more. I stood in the door. You pretended you hadn't noticed me, but I knew you had, and you knew I knew. I stood and watched you.'

Will hugged his arms to his chest. 'I don't remember that,' he said weakly.

Hannibal did not seem bothered by this.

'Did you hear me?' Will repeated.

'Yes—ah. It was a small moment. A healthy brain would forget, too.'

'No, I used to remember everything. When I was sick, I—I relived whole days. Every detail. Now, I can't—there's gaps now. Some things are out of reach.'

He felt himself growing panicked. He exhaled forcefully to remind his lungs how to breathe. Hannibal was right to dismiss it, and Will needed to stop obsessing over every little thing being a neurological symptom—but his brain was the thing that made Will who he was, which was true for anyone but doubly so, he felt, for him, and how were you supposed to stay calm when something tried to take you away from yourself?

'The first day Amelie went to preschool, you were meant to drive her. She refused to let you leave, and you stayed all day. You called me to ask if I would bring you lunch, because you hadn't packed any. Do you remember?'

Will nodded weakly. 'A boy gave me one of those sponge dinosaurs they all wanted back then. To make me feel better on my first day. Amelie was very jealous. I gave it to you in exchange for the lunch.'

'I had forgotten the dinosaur,' Hannibal said with a smile, and it was painfully graceful, because he could, occasionally, be graceful, though Will had forgotten it. 'Are you going to tell me about a time you were happy, now?'

'I don't know I can think of one time,' Will said softly. 'I was happy pretty much the whole time. Until the end. So. Yeah.'

He wiped at his eyes.

'But that wasn't real happiness, was it? It was just playing at happiness. Pretending—and you were helping me pretend. I hate you for that. Because it means I was never really married. I was never really happy. It was never real for me, but it was real for you. How the fuck is that fair?'

Hannibal did not answer. Will felt his gaze on him, heavy and hot.

'And now. Now you have the temerity to hate me because it was real for you and not for me, and I get that, I do, because that's not fucking fair, either, but how could I have—if you'd made me stop pretending, if you'd pulled the rug, if you'd forced me, I—I would have done it. I would have done anything for you back then—Stop looking at me. Just—for a moment. Okay?'

He heard Hannibal stand and leave. He tried to control his breathing while he was gone, to snatch back the reins from the heartbreak and the disease, his wrecked body working hard against him.

By the time Hannibal came back and stood a box of tissues next to him on the floor, he'd just about managed it.

'I'm done, thanks,' said Will sourly. 'You want to contribute to this conversation, by the way?'

Hannibal sat back down opposite him. 'I don't think you wanted me to talk. But I could contribute now, if you like.'

‘Yeah. Sure. Contribute.’

He saw Hannibal think again. Will couldn’t decide if he liked being given so much consideration. ‘What would I say that you don’t already know?’

‘I don’t know!’ And his body won again, Jesus Christ— ‘Something to make it fucking better, Hannibal! Tell me you’ve never loved me. Tell me none of it happened. Only, that’ll maybe make it better for five seconds, before I remember— Or tell me it did happen, the good and the bad, and that you love me, that you forgive me—but that’s not making it better, is it?’ The enormity of it, of the knowing: knowing he was right, knowing he wasn’t just saying it to hurt him, knowing there was nothing he had left to give except honesty— ‘It’ll never *be* better. It’ll never—’

‘Obviously I love you,’ Hannibal interrupted. ‘But I don’t know that I can forgive you, just now.’

Will took a tissue out of the box. He dropped it, wet, on the floor, then took another.

‘Does that help?’ asked Hannibal sincerely.

‘No,’ Will laughed. He eyed him through eyes blurry from tears, and saw that he held himself very still, and that if Will pushed this more, he was going to have a meltdown, too, which Will could not just now deal with.

‘No,’ he repeated, forcing his tone to turn lighter. ‘No, it just makes me remember how annoying you sound when you say that. Remember? You were a broken fucking record, and so embarrassing—*my lover, my beloved, my heart, my* goddamn *liver*—and what lover? We hadn’t even fucked by the time you started on it. I seriously thought it was performance art for a while. That I was supposed to get the joke.’

Hannibal had not moved, but he hadn’t got worse, at least. ‘I hesitate to say it, considering your concerns, but I think you are either misremembering or wilfully exaggerating.’

‘Misremembering? How could I misremember that?’ Will tossed the next used tissue at Hannibal. It bounced off his chest. ‘I *dreamed* in sweet talk. I thought you were using me as a case study for a paper on psychic driving.’

The corner of Hannibal’s mouth twitched. ‘How suspicious you were of my motives.’

‘I mean, I thought you were just trying get in my pants, at first. That you were going about it in the most round-about, ethically questionable way you could think of. But sleeping with you made it worse. What was I supposed to think then?’

Hannibal got up to top off their coffees. There wasn’t very much left in the pot, but he still went up to the fridge to pour out more milk. He picked up Will’s used tissues, too. Will saw him pocket one before depositing the rest in the trash.

‘That’s disgusting, Hannibal,’ he told him, not seriously. ‘Bit hungry now. What’s for breakfast? Other than my tears and snot?’

‘I am not going to eat the tissue.’

‘Might bring back *Mystery Meal* and feed it to you.’

Hannibal gave him a measured look. ‘For breakfast, something light to make up for all that coffee on an empty stomach. Rice pudding, I think.’

Will groaned, though he was too hungry, really, to snub anything. He stopped the act when he saw Hannibal sit back on the floor again.

‘Breakfast?’ he reminded.

‘In a minute.’

‘What do you want to do, then? You want to talk more?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay.’

But Hannibal didn’t say anything, only watched Will drink his coffee. This was not a good thing, because under his gaze and in the quiet, the feeling growing in Will demanded attention. Ignored too long, it had matured and set. And if Hannibal never spoke, Will was going to have to say it aloud, there would be no escaping it; he’d give it to him, and to the quiet.

‘I don’t know how much more there is to say,’ he tried. ‘I mean, there probably is a lot. We can talk about anything you want, if it would help you. Just not sure it would help me, now.’

‘I don’t have a topic in mind.’

‘You’re really not pulling your weight in this conversation, you know.’

‘I have said everything to you I wanted to. You have not said everything to me, yet.’

‘Yeah.’ Will swallowed, looked at the ceiling. ‘I guess. I don’t know that I can forgive you, either.’

‘I expected so. What shall we do now, then?’

‘I don’t know.’

Hannibal nodded, accepting. The quiet grew, and the feeling with it.

‘I don’t know,’ Will repeated. ‘But this isn’t working.’

Hannibal’s whole body snapped tense and still, more so than before, more so than Will had seen in a long time.

‘What isn’t working?’ he asked, in the perfectly flat tone that presaged a storm.

Will sighed. He looked at him. He deserved at least to be looked at.

‘This,’ he said softly. ‘Me, leaving you. Us—not being together.’

And Hannibal set down his coffee, crawled over Will’s legs on the floor, and kissed him.

Chapter End Notes

You know Will's on his way to a full recovery if he's back to making bad choices.

Next time, a final chapter from Hannibal's perspective!

Four months after the Christmas Eve party.

Chapter Summary

> *The boiler hummed its melodies. The weak bathroom light fizzled in the overcast dim. Will was changing out of his play clothes and into a clean pair of sweatpants. His back was to Hannibal, his feet curled from the cold of the tile. And Hannibal thought: Will had fared badly when he tried it, yes, but he had been able to conceive of a life without Hannibal in it. This was the one advantage he still held over him.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Twenty-one.
Four months after the Christmas Eve party.

The road wound through the forest, dressed in luscious green. Trees rose high above them, obscuring the blue sky cast in thready cloud. There had not been a single day of heat, yet, but this morning Hannibal had woken to unusually warm floors, and the wind of yesterday had gone. He edged open the car window to breathe in the scent of the air: sticky sap, humid earth, skyrocketing pollen count.

‘Nucleus, ribosomes, cytoplasm…’

In the back of the car, Amelie sat with her eyes closed, face etched in a grimace of focus, and Ellie and Zoe sleeping in a pile across her lap. Opposite, Will was balancing a thick volume over Buster’s head, attempting half-successfully to save the various notes from a devouring. The dogs had foregone breakfast as a preventive measure before the drive, and they were dealing with the calorie deficiency in two very different ways.

This had been the topic of the week: Amelie’s science competition. While Amelie’s usual approach to the academic was to forget her books at school and rely on general intelligence to achieve fair results, she did occasionally embark on a fast-flaring passion project, particularly when Thomas, who followed an oft-discussed gifted programme at a school for gifted children, reported to them a trophy or a high mark. Last week, he had spent a half hour telling Will about a special award he was due to receive for his achievements in Biology. Amelie had since identified and signed up for a school competition no one had heard mentioned before, set to take place in three weeks’ time. The intent, clearly, was to prove to the world that these accomplishments would come easily to her, too, if she were not generally too busy with more interesting things.

Hannibal thought this all entertaining, and he was looking forward to discovering whether she would persist with the insane regimen of study she had devised, or whether she would

grow bored and forget about it in due course. Will, however, had been on medical leave for several months now, his brain idle and his nerves frayed by the idleness.

'I mean, do I help her?' he'd asked Hannibal again last night. As with the previous four times he had asked, he'd not been interested in an answer. 'It's good to, uh, encourage academic success. But does she even need academic success, at her age? What if that puts too much pressure on her, and devalues everything else non-academic that she *is* genuinely interested in? But then, if she does it and she wins something, that'll be motivating. Or maybe it's better if she fails. Failure's important to learn, too. Maybe we shouldn't help, then.'

'It seems any course of action will ultimately result in some form of cognitive benefit,' Hannibal had remarked. 'May I suggest, then, doing whichever pleases you. Or doing nothing, which should work just as well, from a psychological standpoint.'

'Don't bring psychology into this,' Will had warned, with the usual disdain he reserved for his field.

'Lysosome, nitochondrion—'

'Mitochondrion,' corrected Will. 'Starts with an *m.*'

Amelie opened her eyes. 'No, it doesn't.'

'It does.'

Hannibal glanced at the rearview mirror to observe.

'Show me.'

Will manoeuvred the atlas and Buster so that neither fell onto the floor of the car, and he showed her.

'Well, it doesn't matter,' Amelie decided. 'I need to know how to spell it, not how to say it.'

Will caught Hannibal's eye in the mirror, just to smile.

'Do you know what it does? The mitochondrion?'

'No. I'm learning that part later.'

'I could tell you a bit. Think I still remember from back when. It might help you remember it better?'

'No,' she stated decisively and pushed the atlas back to him. 'I have a system.'

'Don't mess with the system. Got it.'

There was another turn in the road, and the house revealed itself, set against the backdrop of the skies. The engine died down. The dogs rose, wagging their tails and panting excitedly, sensing what was to come. Hannibal came around to help Amelie with Zoe, who was a

wiggly thing, and a moment later they were all off, sprinting toward the house to sniff at the porch steps, at the wicker chair, to scratch at the locked door.

'Who has the key? Do I have the key?' Will was patting his pockets. He had grown erratically forgetful, misplacing his phone daily, going back into the bathroom to brush his teeth shortly after he'd finished, and occasionally demanding to be driven back home to check whether he'd really locked the door. Hannibal could not determine whether this was a lingering effect of the encephalitis or Will's usual scatter-mindedness, only exacerbated by the breakdown in routine. In either case, there was not much to be done except to train it out of him, which was slow-going: he could, after all, easily rely on Hannibal to remember for him.

'Oh—you're not telling me?'

'No,' confirmed Hannibal.

'In the inside pocket,' said Amelie, eyes on the ground as she searched for a good stick to throw.

'*Thank* you. Guess who's on dog duty when Amelie and I go fishing? He gets to vacuum, too, because he's been so nice to me.'

The lock clicked open. The hinges gave a whine. Inside was indeed dusty, and dark from the shutters, and stale-smelling. Will went around to open all the windows while Hannibal checked the stove and clicked on the fridge. He had brought them fare for the whole weekend, though the plan was of course that they should feast on the catch. Will's previous attempt at fishing had been cut short when one of his headaches struck—he'd been picked up by a fellow fisherman and driven to emergency, and Hannibal had had to collect him from there, and explain to the doctors this was only normal—but this had been nearly two months ago. The headaches had lessened in intensity and frequency since; Hannibal was hopeful there would indeed be fresh fish for dinner.

'Waders, rods, and let's go,' came Will's voice from somewhere in the house, followed by three barks of encouragement.

The Wolf Trap house seemed larger to Hannibal, now that he was alone in it. He had never been, before. Even years ago, he had rarely stayed long enough to be without company. This new circumstance suited him. He was able finally to take stock of the house in the way he preferred, without Will looking over his shoulder and taking note of anything Hannibal took note of.

He vacuumed and washed the floors, the effect of which was promptly ruined by Buster and Zoe skidding around to hunt the mop. He looked through Will's closet, gently amused to discover the same clothes Will had worn before, and through, their marriage. As he ran his fingers down the sleeves of shirts and jackets, his thumb caught on a few spots where small, uneven stitches had been sewn into the fabric to close a tear. Will had never offered to mend Hannibal's clothes in this way, though he had done so with a few of Amelie's items. Hannibal

grew unnerved by this now. Why should he be excluded, after all? It was true that he might have purchased himself a new shirt should an old one wear through, but so might have Will; it was really no argument.

Hannibal would have enjoyed, while being married, feeling at the roughness of the stitch in his cuff with an idle finger, be it at work, while driving, or when dressing in the morning. Now that he was no longer a married man, of course, the stitch, in its proprietary nature, would be illicit. Will had no right to assume ownership of Hannibal or of Hannibal's clothes, and if he dared to, he would be stepping outside the bounds of their current relationship—a flirtation, a provocation, or an offense—it would be forward, it would be possessive, it would be inappropriate.

He rearranged Will's spice cabinet and reorganised the cutlery. He lifted a few books off the shelf at random, curious what he might discover by chance, and read a bit of Faulkner, an ancient Louisiana cookbook, and a tale of a bunny undergoing tonsil removal. There was an album in which Will kept the photographs they took during a trip to Chesapeake Bay, in the first year of their marriage, and he leafed through this, too.

He sat by the piano to test its tuning, then played a few easy melodies to entertain the dogs, who enjoyed music.

He took the dogs outside for a stroll, the spring heat swelling until Hannibal had to remove his jacket and open the collar of his shirt.

Finally, he felt appropriately worn out by the various activities, with the weariness of a Saturday that had been intended for relaxation. He lay on Will's bed, which stood downstairs, where Will could protect his dwelling best, and he waited for the walk-sweat to cool and evaporate off his neck and arms.

Curious, that Will had never suggested a similar arrangement at the Baltimore house. Did Hannibal's presence on the same floor change things, and a first-line defence no longer felt necessary? He was a light sleeper; did Will trust him to wake at the sound of a door creaking open downstairs? Or it might have been that Will would have preferred to sleep downstairs, only had failed to mention it. Will had little regard for his own comfort, so it would likely fall to Hannibal to remedy the issue. The study could, if necessary, be moved upstairs, and a space for a bedroom could be found. It would be unorthodox, certainly, but if it made Will more comfortable, Hannibal could hardly find fault with it.

Will was owed his creature comforts. After all, he had lost. And his was no ordinary defeat, nor Hannibal's an ordinary victory: there would be no recovery, no reversal of fortune, no resetting the score. Will had fought so long to leave, only to plead to be taken back; a lesser man would have revelled in his humiliation, but Hannibal saw little need for this. He would be forever victor now, would forever have the upper hand. It was only fair to allow Will his little victories, to arrange a comfortable and pleasing space for him, to let him win back a little dignity in good humour.

There was fresh fish for dinner.

The sky had turned inward and darkened, though it was only early into the afternoon. The spring heat had stretched and swelled until breaking point. It would break soon, expected Hannibal, and resolve into rain; when he saw Will and Amelie through the window, they were rushing. They should not have. The rain was determined to wait them out.

'It's strange weather,' commented Will. His clothes wore sprawling stains of dark where the water had got through. Amelie, for her part, was soaked.

'It's spring weather. What is the point of these waders if you are going to get wet in any case?'

'Maybe somebody ended up in the water. Maybe there was a bit of shoving involved.'

The fish glistened in Will's hands. It was a beautiful Coho salmon, fat and crimson in the underbelly. Will was quick to work, scraping away the scales, slicing smoothly into meat, easing out the intestines with nimble fingers.

Amelie's hair clung to the towel. Hannibal rubbed harder at the scalp, displacing crystals of dirt and sand. 'Towel's rough,' she complained. 'Be careful.'

'We will bring the soft towels from home, next time. And an additional change of clothes, in case there is more shoving.'

Amelie did not accuse Will of instigating the shoving, merely hummed an affirmation. When she remembered to be, she was careful to withhold any perceived wrongdoings on Will's part from Hannibal, and, he suspected, vice-versa. Will worried about this: that she would feel the peace to be tentative, or distrust it, but Hannibal thought privately that tentativeness did not necessarily equate to distrust, or to a compounding of anxiety. Special gentleness was afforded to that which struck new and vulnerable, and a care which quietened the harsher words, and smoothed out ruffled feathers.

'You want me to cut it up? Or are we frying this whole?'

'I don't imagine you are willing to wait for it to roast?'

'No,' came a scoff from under the towel.

'Then whole, please.'

The kitchen was all herb and lemon then. Droplets of oil danced in the air. Amelie browned asparagus in butter, then ate half straight out of the pan from impatient hunger. She was either ravenous these days or nibbling on fruit like a little bird. It might have been a response to trauma, or it might have, as Will had suggested in a rare display of level-headedness, the first hormonal flutterings of prepubescence. Hannibal put together her plate first, laying at the centre the meatiest part of the fish lathered generously in butter.

Once they had eaten, Hannibal expected Will to succumb to tiredness. Instead, it was Amelie who stretched out on the bed and promptly fell to sleep. Usually adamant against the

institution of naps, she looked down on Will's habit, now that he was no longer so colourless and pitiful that any mockery fell flat.

'Look who's sleeping now,' Will whispered, vindicated.

'You are, very nearly. Your eyes are closing.'

'No, no—I have to push through. Give me something to do. If I'm moving, I'm not sleeping.'

It would not work, but Hannibal gave him the pan to scrub. The sponge gritted rhythmically against the burnt bits of salmon skin. Wind, again, whistled in the trees. The draught through the cracks in the old window casing was unpleasant on skin. Filled up on fish fat and beets, the dogs slept in their old beds. Ellie snored gently.

'This is still home to them, I think,' said Will, looking. 'Wonder when that'll change.'

He was thinking about the other dogs, Hannibal knew, living with Margot and Thomas now. During the last visit, they had leapt and whined the moment they heard Will's voice through the door, but when they'd grown hungry, they pleaded with Thomas first. Will had said nothing of it; something passed behind his eyes, and he stood too fast to go sit with Amelie.

'When will it change for you?'

Will gave him a sidelong look. 'Once you burn through all my pans, I won't have much choice.'

'The pan is poor quality.'

'It's fine.'

'I will buy you better pans.'

'Oh, but then for sure I'll move back out. I wouldn't risk it.'

Hannibal did not particularly enjoy this topic, even in jest. 'I have invited Abigail for dinner this Thursday,' he told Will. 'You have PT in the morning, but there should be plenty of time to rest in between.'

Will set the pan down strategically, as though to distance himself from a temptation. Hannibal smiled at this, angling his head away to hide it from immediate notice.

'You know I don't—' Will sighed. 'Do I get any say in this?'

'Certainly you would, if you were my husband,' explained Hannibal pleasantly. 'As things stand, you are merely my lover. I suppose you may stay in your room all night in protest, if you like.'

The guest room had transformed into Will's room, now that there was no longer much risk of Will soiling himself on the trek down the corridor. Small changes had been made: Will's favourite sheets had been brought in, his clothes had moved into the closet, and firmer

pillows had been purchased, because Hannibal detested a soft pillow. He, too, generally slept in the guest room, until approximately four in the morning, when Will's bladder woke him, and he remembered he hadn't meant for Hannibal to stay the night.

'Quiet,' he'd urge him. 'Go now. Go.'

'The night is nearly over.'

'What if she wakes early and comes to see you? Huh?' There would be a kick in the shin, then. 'You're not supposed to be in here. Get out.'

Will thought it would be confusing for Amelie, if she found out they were again sleeping together. Hannibal did not see what about it might confuse her, but he indulged Will in his little oddities.

'I guess you've already met, anyway,' Will sighed beside him, and picked up the pan. 'That ship's sailed.'

'You should learn to share, Will.'

'No,' said Will firmly, looking at him, and a shiver went through Hannibal. 'Did you turn the boiler on, upstairs?'

Hannibal shook his head.

'I'll show you where it is, in case you want warm water when you shower tonight.'

'I was hoping for hot water.'

'Then you should have turned the boiler on earlier.'

He followed Will to the upstairs bathroom and watched him click the boiler on. It was a one-man job that either of them could have managed, but Will enjoyed having Hannibal follow him on these little excursions. He would tell Hannibal to come watch him take the laundry out, brush his teeth at night, restock coffee from the cellar. He would never say that he wanted company, only demand that Hannibal's presence was necessary—that he needed to watch how to do it properly, or help Will in case he grew faint, or direct Will to where a thing was stored. Hannibal thought this charming, and happily played along.

When they did this, Hannibal sometimes imagined there was a length of tether between them, and that for his own comfort, he needed to keep this loose, lest it tighten unpleasantly around the throat. He would step forward when Will stepped forward, and ease back when Will eased back. The game concealed a deeper truth, which Hannibal had woken into, one day recently: that the only freedom that existed was in the way the chain sat loose enough to escape notice, and that he had felt trapped, before, and collared and suffocated, because he had allowed Will to draw further away than was good for him. Will was a wild thing, had always been so, and could not be trusted to understand the advantage of being kept; but Hannibal knew better. He should have worked harder, through praise or trickery, to afford Will the comfort of a deceptively loose leash.

The boiler hummed its melodies. The weak bathroom light fizzled in the overcast dim. Will was changing out of his play clothes and into a clean pair of sweatpants. His back was to Hannibal, his feet curled from the cold of the tile. And Hannibal thought: Will had fared badly when he tried it, yes, but he had been able to conceive of a life without Hannibal in it. This was the one advantage he still held over him. Of course he had been happy in their marriage—he hadn't understood that he had been caged.

Hannibal, for his part, had forgotten that there could have been a life without the marriage, or without Will in it. But for the former, he was living it now, and for the latter, he had lived it, too, for close to three days, after he had signed the divorce papers and left Will at the hospital. And it had been fine.

This had struck Hannibal as a revelation. In some way, he had even enjoyed it, those three solitary days, or at the very least he had felt lighter for it. It was not unlike an amputation of a diseased limb: a loss, but equally a freedom from the pain of gangrene. One could live just fine, without a limb; it merely wasn't to anyone's preference.

'Jack called me,' said Will suddenly. His shirt was halfway on. 'When we were out by the river.'

Hannibal leaned against the doorjamb, where he might relax into watching him better. 'How is Jack?'

'Fine. He didn't ask me to come back to work.'

'You are coming back to work in the new term.'

'You know I don't mean teaching,' scowled Will. 'Stop playing dumb.'

'I am leaving you the space to say what you want to say, instead of talking around it.'

Will glared at him. His hair lay mussed against his cheek. 'I'm angry that he didn't ask me to go back to consulting.'

Hannibal nodded. 'Do you want to go back to consulting?'

'No.' Will hesitated. 'No. I would have said no. Someday, maybe—but it wouldn't be good for anyone, now. Least of all Amelie. Or me, likely.'

'But you wished to be asked.'

'Don't make that face.'

He was referring to smiling. 'You have been without an occupation for months,' Hannibal excused him, amused. 'It is only natural that you would want your ego stroked.'

'I don't know why I bother telling you anything,' said Will crossly. The shirt had come all the way on.

'I'm sure Jack would ask if the Chesapeake Ripper struck again. If that would help your ego.'

‘Too bad the Chesapeake Ripper is too busy making friends with young FBI trainees. Inviting them for dinners. And that’s when he’s not educating intelligent little girls on butchering. He can’t afford to do anything stupid, cornered in like that. My official position is that he’s taking an extended break from stupidity, and learning to be careful and discreet.’

‘An interesting theory,’ Hannibal praised. ‘All we can do is wait to see whether you’re right.’

Will’s teeth flashed. ‘Want to bet?’

Hannibal shook his head gently. ‘I have a competing theory. According to our daughter, the Chesapeake Ripper has perished. Sepsis took him, or perhaps blood loss, or organ failure.’

Will grew serious then. ‘I don’t like you encouraging this.’

‘Encouraging what?’

‘This—I don’t know. Coping mechanism? Lie? Play-pretend, delusion?’

‘Over time, any tale takes on new colours,’ Hannibal mused. ‘What remains is the heart of it, the thing that matters. Amelie is clear on the thing matters, which is that she took a knife and carved out the future, and in this future she saved your life. If she had not done so, you would not have been brought to the hospital and diagnosed, and you would not have broken free of your depressive, pitiful inertia—and the Chesapeake Ripper would have surely struck again, if merely to relieve himself of the frustration you’d continue to cause him.’

Will’s eyes widened. ‘Is that what you think?’ he hissed. ‘That you *saved* me?’

Hannibal hesitated. ‘If we consider the final outcome—’

‘You weren’t saving me. You were torturing me. I know you’re not right in the head by a long shot, Hannibal, but I can’t see that line blurring, even for you.’

Hannibal took the time to swallow, and to choose carefully his next words.

‘That offends me,’ he spoke evenly.

Will took no such consideration. ‘Well, sorry if that *offends* you—it fucking offends me, too, when you try to pervert what happened.’

He stood close to Hannibal. Clothes lay in a pile on the floor. Hannibal hunched to pick them up, fold them, and lay them out on the hamper, so he’d remember to take them home to wash.

‘I am not denying that my intention was to hurt you rather than benefit you,’ he told Will over his shoulder. ‘In the end, this is a philosophical question. Should our actions be judged for the intent behind them, or for the effect they bring about? If a man kills a poor performer, is he guilty of murder, or is he saving the orchestra?’

‘And if a man kills his ex-husband? What’s your take on that, Socrates?’

‘I can see the philosophical does not agree with you today. I would not like to offend you.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Will laughed. ‘I have very little pride left.’

Hannibal angled his head in agreement. ‘Yet you defend it with teeth,’ he remarked, pleased.

There was a silence. Hannibal watched Will’s reflection in the mirror over the sink. He was working with his anger, trying to quench the flame. Hannibal enjoyed that he was so careful with him, but it worked against them, too. A choked flame grew frustrated the longer it wasn’t allowed to spread. Hannibal was not a forest, nor a house to be burnt down. His skin could peel and show red, but it would regrow.

‘I didn’t mean to offend you, either,’ said Will softly. ‘Before.’

‘You may offend me if you like,’ encouraged Hannibal. ‘I was merely drawing your attention to it.’

‘Well, I do not *like.*’

‘What do you like?’

Will’s brow knotted. ‘You know what I like. Why?’

‘If you refuse to voice your anger, you might at least voice your desires. It would be better for both of us, I think.’

‘I think I’m doing just fine voicing my anger.’

‘You are too careful.’

‘You don’t want to see me when I’m not careful.’

‘But I do.’

Will ran a hand through his hair. ‘You’ve seen it, Hannibal. Did you enjoy it?’

Hannibal said nothing.

‘Maybe we both need to be a little careful, for a while,’ said Will. ‘Maybe that’s what I want.’

Hannibal gave a nod. ‘What else?’

‘Jesus. Look—I know I have trouble asking. I’m trying to get better. To be fair, you’re not making it easy.’

‘Then quit asking,’ suggested Hannibal.

He watched Will’s face as the words registered. He wondered what demand Will might make: to follow him, to turn the downstairs study into a bedroom, to permit him to come back to work *now*, to move to Wolf Trap with him—but he only stepped in, grabbed Hannibal by the shirt, and pinned him to the wall.

Months of illness had stripped Will of muscle, had made him slighter and smaller than he'd been, and so Hannibal could have fought him off without much effort. He did not mind the pretending, though. Overpowered, he rested his head against the tile and let Will grind against him, and shove his tongue down his throat, and inhale sharply against his neck like he was a claiming beast. Only when Will tired did Hannibal take him by the shoulders and flip their positions, supporting Will against the wall in case his knees gave out, and worked him hard, until his breaths grew breathless.

The weight of him made Hannibal think of Will's lecture, last week. Alana had taken over his classes, but she'd come down with stomach flu, and Will had volunteered to step in for the day. Hannibal had sat in the audience and listened. He'd raised his hand, once, because he thought it would be amusing, and Will had ignored him until it became inappropriate to keep it up. His voice had been sure and strong, betraying no hesitation or tiredness, and the students sat mesmerised, taken in.

After, though, when everyone had left, Will had collapsed against Hannibal. His body shook minutely from the effort, and he huffed, annoyed at his own weakness, but Hannibal—oh, Hannibal revelled in it: it was warm in his arms, delicate and sharp-edged, and it was a sign only of the strength buried underneath.

'You would not have been able to do this, a month ago.'

'I know,' Will had murmured against his shoulder. 'What did you want to ask, before?'

Hannibal had smiled into his hair. 'I wanted to ask how it felt, being here again.'

'It feels good. To do things again. To be alive.'

And it felt good, too, to watch Will from among the crowd, and know that Will knew. If Hannibal had to choose a thing to complain about, it might have been only that no one *else* knew. Naturally, Will couldn't have introduced Hannibal to the room without some involved explanation.

Marriage facilitated this, Hannibal supposed.

'What are you thinking about?' panted Will wetly against his cheek.

Hannibal kissed his forehead, just under the hairline, where he smelled of sweat. 'The sunken cost fallacy,' he said.

'Huh?'

'The reason you will not consider remarrying in the near future.'

Will pushed at his shoulders to get him to ease off, exasperated. 'Hannibal. We've not been divorced four months. Enjoy it.'

'I am,' promised Hannibal.

Will stared him down a moment, then laughed.

‘What’s so amusing?’

‘The sunken cost fallacy.’ Will shook his head. ‘You really think I'm so cheap I won’t marry you again, just because I poured half my net worth into getting this goddamn divorce finalised?’

It was an over-exaggeration, and anyway Hannibal hadn't quite thought about it this way. It did sound like the sort of thing that might have occurred to Will, however.

‘I think you value your time and effort,’ Hannibal amended.

‘Such a diplomat.’

After his orgasm, Will’s defences were worn through, and he followed Hannibal obediently into Amelie’s bedroom, accepted the bed, and the blanket, and no longer fought his closing eyes. The light was dying, outside. Hannibal turned on the bedside lamp to regard him a moment. His cheeks looked pinker against the pinks of Amelie’s bedsheets, his mouth redder in the orange light.

‘Wake me up,’ Will mumbled at Hannibal.

‘I will.’

Hannibal never woke him. The cold did, two hours later. Every tap in the house spouted iced water, the dogs piled up over one another, and the wind howled and rattled the windowpanes. When Will stumbled downstairs, shivering and cursing, Hannibal and Amelie had started the fire already; it cast ghost-flitters over the floor and over their faces.

‘The heating’s out,’ Amelie informed him cheerfully.

Will rubbed at his face, trying to get the numbness to budge. ‘Why’s it so dark?’

He clicked on the light, which did very little.

‘The power went out, and the gas,’ said Hannibal. ‘Hence, the heating. It might have something to do with the stack of unpaid bills on your desk.’

‘There’s no—’

‘The stack was on your floor. I moved it to the desk.’

Will grumbled his way there, and back. He hunched by the fire to make out the writing. Hannibal and Amelie had had the same idea when they’d brought their sketches here, but they were fast discovering that it was not comfortable on the floor, and that the cool from one side of the room against the sizzling heat from the fireplace was sanding their eyes, and making them too languid to draw.

‘I’m calling them.’ Will’s voice was rough with fury. ‘This is insane. I’m too sick to keep up with these for a couple months, and they decide I might as well freeze to death?’

‘Don’t call now. Save your charge,’ advised Amelie.

‘And you.’ Will turned to Hannibal. ‘You didn’t think to pay these bills when you found them, rather than just move them to a different room?’

‘Certainly I would have,’ said Hannibal with a smile, ‘if you were my—’

‘Don’t.’

‘I like it.’ Amelie wrapped the heavy blanket tighter around her. The sketchbook had fallen to the wayside, and the pencil had rolled away. ‘It’s like we’re in the past.’

‘I don’t want to be in the past, I want to be in the now,’ said Will sourly. ‘And I want to not be freezing.’

‘Can we make hot chocolate and drink it from very old cups? We should have brought the antique set.’

‘It might be difficult to make the hot chocolate without gas,’ Hannibal reminded her.

‘Oh. Maybe—if we put a pot in the fire—can you do that?’

‘With the right pot, certainly.’

It took some experimenting and a trip to the shed, but they managed to produce the hot chocolate as per Amelie’s preference, with a cranberry and cinnamon infusion, and thick on cream. Once they had wrapped Will in additional insulation, he resigned himself to the adventure, though Hannibal suspected he was merely saving up his anger for when he was asked to pay back interest.

‘We should try camping.’ When he spoke to Amelie, Will was smiling. ‘You have a knack for this.’

‘I’ve done camping,’ Amelie huffed. ‘Tommy and I slept in a tent for, like, three days, in the woods of the estate. It’s not even hard. Maybe if you’re camping in winter, then it’s more of a challenge.’

‘Jesus Christ.’ He looked at Hannibal pleadingly. ‘No veto? I’m on my own. Alright, fine. Winter camping.’

‘Not next winter, though, because we’re already going on our trip.’

She said it lightly, only drawing out the words and never looking at anyone. Hannibal wondered how long she’d been looking for an opportunity to bring it up, or why she’d been so reluctant to. ‘What is this trip?’ he asked.

‘For Amelie’s twelfth birthday,’ Will broke in. ‘I promised I’d take her to see Lithuania. Explore those roots, a bit.’

‘Let me remind everyone that my last birthday was horrible,’ Amelie said. ‘So my next should make up for it, shouldn’t it?’

‘That is true.’

Amelie shuffled closer to him. ‘You can come with us if you want. But Will said maybe you’re not going to want to.’

Will was likely right, which annoyed Hannibal. As much as he enjoyed the fact that Will understood him, now, and could predict him, he did not enjoy feeling predictable.

‘I will consider it,’ he said, ignoring Will’s amusement. ‘We do have a relative still living there, I believe. If I came, I suppose I could make introductions.’

Amelie wanted to know more about her cousin, then, and Hannibal told her. Meanwhile, Will watched him with suspicion, displeased to be shown he was not always right. Hannibal did not imagine Will would be pleased if he did decide to come along with them, or if he arranged a meeting with Chiyoh, either. It was too bad, then, that they had between them the tether, and that Will couldn’t very well do anything about it, anymore—he’d had his chance, and wasted it.

With the night and the cold, the rain had come. Hannibal and Will moved the chairs off the porch, then draped them in their wet coats by the fire so they would dry. Amelie briefly entertained the idea of taking a sponge bath by candlelight and had enlisted Will’s help in heating up a pot of water in the fire, but ultimately decided this was not worth the effort. Hannibal heated up some water for their teeth, and Will used what was left over to soften the dried discharge beneath Ellie’s eyes.

Unwashed, they changed into their nightclothes, then raided Will’s closet for additional socks and sweaters. The rooms upstairs were too cold to contemplate sleeping in, so they fit themselves into Will’s bed, taking a time to rearrange the pillows and blankets so that no one was complaining. During, Amelie accidentally knocked her elbow into Will’s chin, and Will’s knee connected with Hannibal’s groin with some force. He claimed this had been an accident, too.

‘Should we just call it quits and go home?’ Will was massaging his chin. ‘Come back for a full weekend when I’ve sorted this out? The weather’s going to be miserable tomorrow, anyway.’

‘No!’

‘I was asking Tėtis.’

Amelie rose to reach over Will’s body and speak directly into Hannibal’s ear. Beneath her, Will wheezed.

‘You want to stay for the whole weekend, like we agreed,’ she whispered in Lithuanian. ‘This is the voice in your head speaking.’

‘The voice in my head is quite adamant that we stay,’ Hannibal reported.

With the heat of the fire and the three combined bodies, Hannibal was soon warm and took off his socks and sweater. Amelie did the same, and only Will watched them incredulously, so they kept him between them, pressing close to stave off his trembling. They’d been battling his anaemia for months, with poor results; his stomach rebelled against the supplements, and Will rebelled against pointless blood tests.

‘This is how your father lived before I met him,’ Hannibal told Amelie over Will’s trembling form. He was no longer cool to the touch, but the shivers would take a little while to dissipate. ‘He was refusing to pay his bills on principle, back then.’

‘Why?’

‘A dispute with the landlord, he said. Though I am not so sure that was the real reason.’

‘I’m leaving,’ Will warned from under his blanket. It was a wonder he could breathe, let alone make little comments.

‘How?’ scoffed Amelie. ‘You’re trapped. Tėtis—can you tell that story? Like you used to tell me. About how you met, and how I was born. Do you remember?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘So, tell it again.’

Hannibal closed his eyes, and tried to remember how the story went.

‘Once,’ he began, ‘when you were little, you asked your father why we chose you and not your brother. And he said: *sometimes, you look at someone, and you just know…*’

The End.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for making it through to the end! And a HUGE thank you to everyone who's commented <3

This story was something quite unexpected for me, but I grew to love it so so much, and I am satisfied-but-sad to be wrapping it up. Please let me know how you enjoyed the ending, and if you think Hannibal will manage to eventually annoy Will into getting married again, which seems to be the strategy here.

I am somewhat tempted to revisit this verse, if purely because it would give me an excuse to go visit Lithuania on a research trip... if I end up caving in, I'll let you know. If you're on tumblr, do follow me at gzdacz-writes-fic for updates!

End Notes

Thank you for reading!
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